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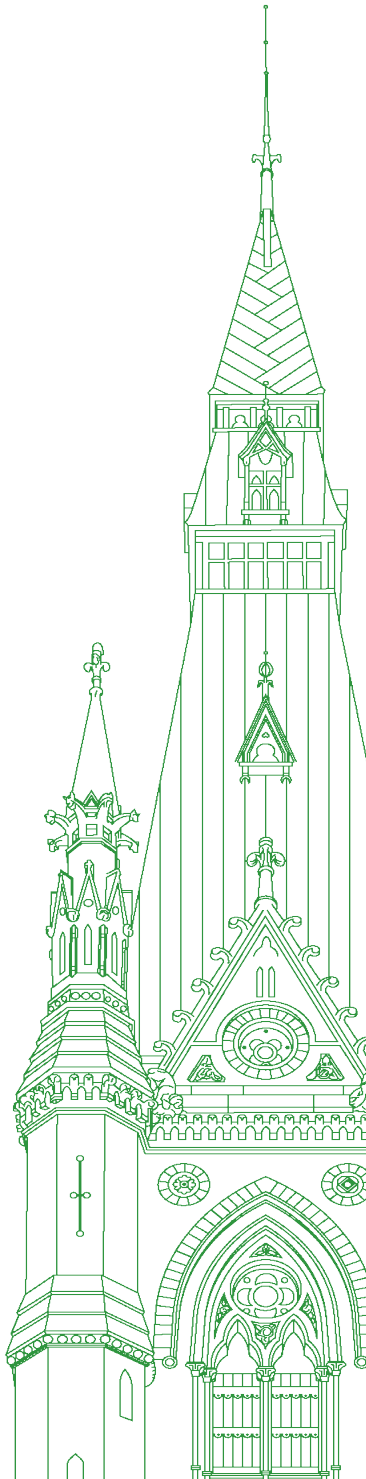

Chair: The Honourable Marc Garneau

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Tuesday, June 21, 2022

● (1625)

[*English*]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): Good afternoon, colleagues, and good afternoon to our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 27 of the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

[*English*]

We are gathered here today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation. Of course, today is National Indigenous Peoples Day, and I want to recognize the contributions of all first nations, Métis and Inuit people.

[*Translation*]

Today we are continuing our fourth study, which pertains to Arctic sovereignty, security and emergency preparedness of indigenous peoples.

[*English*]

On today's panel, we will have the pleasure of hearing from the Honourable Richard Mostyn, Minister of Community Services, Government of Yukon; Dr. Ken Coates, professor and Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan; Marcia Mirasty, senior director of health for Meadow Lake Tribal Council; and, finally, Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie, Athabasca Denesuline, Prince Albert Grand Council.

[*Translation*]

I would like to remind everyone of the rules and requirements of the Board of Internal Economy regarding physical distance and the wearing of masks.

[*English*]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services in English, French and Inuktitut are available for today's meeting. Please be patient with the interpretation. There may be a delay, especially since the Inuktitut has to be translated into English first before it can be translated into French and vice versa.

The interpretation button is found at the bottom of your screen, and you have the choice of either English, French or Inuktitut. If interpretation is lost, let us know and we'll stop the proceedings until we can fix it. The “raise hand” feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer.

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

Finally, I'll remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

With that, we'll begin our panel today. I will be going from one witness to another, with five minutes for initial opening remarks and presentation, and after that we'll go to a question period.

Without further ado, I'd like to invite the Honourable Richard Mostyn, Minister of Community Services, Government of Yukon, to make his opening remarks.

Minister, you have five minutes.

Hon. Richard Mostyn (Minister of Community Services, Government of Yukon): Thank you very much.

Hello, everyone.

I'm Richard Mostyn, the Minister of Community Services for the Yukon. I'm joining you today from the traditional territories of the Kwanlin Dun First Nation and the Ta’an Kwach’an Council.

Mr. Chair, it's good to be working with you again. Members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak on behalf of the Yukon today.

It's important to recognize the ongoing engagement between the territorial, federal and first nation governments in the security domain. It reflects the importance of safety and security for our communities in the broadest sense. Arctic security and sovereignty should, at its core, be about the people of the north, with a strong lens on Yukon first nations. We must do everything we can to create healthy, vibrant, thriving and safe communities across the territory. This must include coordinated investments in climate-resilient infrastructure capable of delivering sustainable local services.

Let me provide a smattering of context for those of you who don't know the Yukon. It's important.

The Yukon is growing fast. Why? It's a diverse and inclusive region with robust Internet and transportation connectivity to every community. It has a strong economy and a stunning environment, so, yes, there's a lot going on.

All that said, it's mind-bogglingly small. Our jurisdiction is roughly the size of Campbell River, B.C., spread over a region half the size of B.C., or, if you prefer, four-fifths the size of France. I'll let that sink in for a minute.

We have 11 self-governing first nation governments, not reserves, but real governments, with rights recognized and protected by the Canadian Constitution. Strategically, we are critically important to Canada. Heck, we're critically important to North America, and we have been since the Second World War. We provide the only road access to Alaska's commercial and military interests. Alaskan legislators driving to Juneau have to pass through the Yukon. We also have the only road crossing the Arctic Circle to Canada's north coast, the Dempster Highway. The Yukon has the most western international airport in Canada, and throughout its colonial history, and probably long before, it's been a transport and trade nexus.

When you talk about sovereignty and security in the Yukon, some have recently suggested military bases, but that's not the play. We're in the defence shadow of Alaska, and unlikely to ever come close to matching the hard military power amassed in that state. However, we are the most important supply channel to that state and its military, and also the near eastern Arctic.

My point is that for sovereignty and security we must invest in power, with both tangible green energy and diplomatic influence, and we do that as the territory always has, through robust investment in transportation, trade and energy infrastructure. We must continue to invest in highways, bridges, airports and telecommunications. In the very near future we need to connect it to the North American power grid. I'd argue in the long term and in anticipation of an ice-free Northwest Passage, we need port facilities on Canada's north coast, as close to Alaska as possible, and possibly a rail network linking it to Alberta.

These represent short, medium and 30-year-plus goals to exert sovereignty and security in the north, to mitigate emergencies and to deal with them once they occur.

This won't be easy or cheap, and it won't be possible without the support of our first nation and federal partners, which is why Yukon's co-governance model is so important to the nation. To be successful, all Yukon people have to see themselves thriving in a secure environment, free from energy, climate, housing and food insecurity. In turn, that strengthens the nation's interests.

The Yukon's vision of Arctic sovereignty and security is very much an intersection of meeting the hard defence needs and building resilient communities. My department leads the Yukon Protective Services' programs, which include wildland fire, emergency medical services, and Yukon territorial fire response and emergency measures programs.

I'll end my opening remarks with this.

One of the biggest threats we face to our sovereignty and security in the north is climate change, which we were recently talking about, just actually before everybody arrived at the committee this afternoon. Climate change is being experienced in the north at an accelerated rate compared to the rest of Canada, so there's an awful lot to discuss this afternoon, and I'm happy to take questions later, after I've heard my colleagues.

Thanks very much, everyone.

● (1630)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister Mostyn. It's good to see you again. For everybody's information, Minister Mostyn and I were transport ministers at the same time, so we're old friends.

We'll now go to Professor Ken Coates.

Professor Coates, you have five minutes.

Dr. Ken Coates (Professor and Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan, As an Individual): I was just thanking you for letting me speak to you, and then I decided I should turn the microphone on.

My comments are going to build very much on what the minister just had to say. This is not a new topic for Canada. In fact, one of the things I'm going to say at the end, just to give away my story, is that I'm almost certain we're going to be back having the same conversation 30 years from now.

We've been talking about what Canada should do about sovereignty in the north, about respecting indigenous peoples and about mobilizing the country to address the very severe problems in the Canadian north for a very long time. We haven't really done very well as a nation. I think we need to be clear about that.

I should also say really quickly that I'm delighted that my colleagues from Saskatchewan are here. I'm from the Yukon. I'm a huge fan of the territorial north. If you look at it in terms of personal incomes, GDP, and health and well-being, the poorest parts of Canada are almost all in the provincial north. There are huge problems in northern Manitoba, northern Saskatchewan, across northern Ontario, etc. It's really important we take an inclusive view of the north, build on some of the phenomenal things that have happened in Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut, and bring that learning down further south into the other areas.

Like I say, we've been at this for a very long time. For a very long time, Canada's approach to Arctic sovereignty was actually just to do what I call the showing the flag routine, which is basically letting the world know that we had our North West Mounted Police officers up there. We actually backed away from our responsibilities during the Second World War. We basically let the Americans do what they wanted to do, in terms of building the Alaska Highway and the Canol pipeline. Afterwards, we moved very slowly to assume responsibilities as a country.

We're left with a situation in which we do not have a very strong military presence in the north. Our infrastructure in northern Canada is not up to national standards, nor is it up to circumpolar standards. We're not doing as well. I just got back from Greenland. We're not doing as well as Greenland, which is an area that has far more formidable challenges than many parts of the Canadian north.

The issue for me is what we do about this. The issues are getting greater. The minister mentioned climate change. Russia's belligerence in Ukraine has raised the question of challenges to our sovereignty and our comparative inability to really respond to that particularly well.

Let me give you a series of my five greatest hits in terms of things I think we can do better and where we should put our emphasis.

Number one is that defending Arctic sovereignty and improving the lives of indigenous people is very expensive. I know this is the last thing members of the House want to hear, but get ready to spend way more money than you're spending now. That's what's happened in Greenland, in the Faeroe Islands and in northern Norway. Canada is trying to get by on the cheap in terms of the developments and investments in the north. It's going to need a lot of money over a longer period of time.

The second point is that Canada's new north will be created not with indigenous people, but, in the spirit of what the minister said, actually very much by the first nations, by the Métis and by the Inuit population. It is their self-government and their autonomy that are driving the best improvements in the north. That will continue well into the future.

Third, I am a fan of...I wouldn't say modernizing our armed forces. The Department of National Defence just announced a major addition. We do need to northernize our armed forces. We do not have armed forces that are really well prepared to work in the north at all.

Fourth, we do not have enough of a commitment to environmental well-being and sustainability. We have let our scientists down. We're doing the bare minimum in terms of monitoring environmental change. We're only getting started on remediation. Remediation is going to be the theme of environmental responsibility in the years to come.

Fifth is that we always talk in Canada about innovation and how we can become an innovative nation responding to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. We do not have a northern innovation strategy. The Yukon is actually doing quite well in terms of localized innovation and entrepreneurship, but as a country we are not investing heavily in everything from 3D-printed homes to localized food production and alternative energy systems. We should be a world leader in the development of science and technology to address the realities of northern life. It pains me to say that we're not there.

We have a lot to do. We need more money. We need to recognize indigenous authority and expand our military presence. We need world-leading environmental monitoring and remediation and a comprehensive innovation strategy.

I'm going to end the way I started. We have a really difficult task in front of us. My work as a historian tells me we're going to be back here 30 years from now, having exactly the same conversation and wondering why we didn't do enough in the year 2022.

Thank you very much.

● (1635)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Professor Coates. I hope we will make progress over the next 30 years.

We will now go to Ms. Mirasty. You have five minutes.

Ms. Marcia Mirasty (Senior Director, Health, Meadow Lake Tribal Council): *Tansi*, and happy Indigenous Peoples Day.

My name is Marcia Mirasty. I'm the senior health director for the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, which represents 16,000 band members in northwestern Saskatchewan.

I'm going to be a witness, and share our COVID response. I'm going to give my presentation through a SWOT analysis.

Our Meadow Lake Tribal Council COVID response had the following strengths.

There was the creation of strong networks and supports. We were able to pivot and engage in new ways. We partnered with organizations like the Saskatchewan Health Authority, the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan and the Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority.

The virtual and joint weekly conference calls were well supported by chiefs and community leaders, senior management and officials from Indigenous Services Canada, and representatives from the provincial government, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, the RCMP and medical health officers.

Our first nation leaders played a key and important role at these meetings. They were very involved. The federal government provided timely responses and worked with MLTC. ISC, Indigenous Services Canada, was responsive to funding requests. Our COVID immunization was provided to both on-reserve and neighbouring communities.

The engagement and support of first nations and Métis leadership was critical to success. There was a joint funding application that created the North West Communities Incident Command Centre. The strength, adaptability and resilience of people within communities was key to addressing challenges. Prior pandemic planning helped to set the stage for a response.

The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted some weaknesses.

First and foremost, there must be a continued and direct relationship between first nations and the federal government. First nations signed treaties with the federal government. When the provincial government comes in and acts as a middle man, it causes confusion for our people.

Another weakness, the lockdown in northwest Saskatchewan, highlighted the need for security and increased RCMP presence. The highway shutdown to Île-à-la-Crosse also created hardship and highlighted food insecurity. There was a lack of flexibility, and there was a prescriptive approach from the provincial government that reduced the effectiveness of the vaccine rollout. The provincially mandated age-related rollout strategy was not a good fit for our first nations people.

There were pressures on the health care system, both on the SHA, the Saskatchewan Health Authority, and MLTC at Meadow Lake First Nations. In terms of health human resources, we experienced resignations, job changes, shortage of nurses and burnout. It has been challenging to find permanent full-time staff, as many opt to work part-time. It has highlighted the need for an increase in training programs in the health field, such as home health aides, community care assistants, licensed practical nurses, registered nurses and nurse practitioners.

Wildfire evacuations and the organizational changes that occurred prior to COVID made it hard to know who were the proper contacts in the provincial government. The isolation requirements with regard to COVID highlighted the overcrowding that occurs in our communities and the need for more housing. The pandemic also exposed and highlighted the lack of connectivity, infrastructure and resources present in our communities.

In terms of the opportunities that COVID provided, there is the opportunity for increased respect for first nations autonomy on decision-making, and recognition of indigenous authority, such as on the vaccine rollout, which would allow anyone over the age of 18 who wants the vaccine to receive it on a first-come, first-served basis, and to keep the momentum going in a sense of urgency. Our first nations leaders knew where the vaccine needed to go for best effect.

● (1640)

We can also strengthen our partnerships and build on success with key stakeholders and decision-makers. The pandemic highlighted the recognition of how important family and community are to our people. We can improve on communication and community engagement in order to respond to emergent threats. It can be quick if we engage all partners. We can also engage with first nations to determine goals and priorities and on the importance of ensuring their readiness for future emergencies. Intergovernmental collaboration needs improvement when it comes to first nations.

The pandemic also highlighted pressures, dangers or threats. I'm going to go over some of the threats.

The CERB funding affected our people. The working from home strategy worked for some of our staff and not for others. Our work was reliant on emails and phones, but some of our communities did not have connectivity or cell service. The technical difficulties impeded meetings and communication.

Our ability to safeguard our children by allowing home-schooling was impacted, as first nations have not been afforded the necessary infrastructure, such as cellular service and high-speed Internet—in two of our first nations in particular.

The lack of connectivity also affected mental health, addictions and interpersonal violence. For many staff who were working every day, there was staff burnout and heavy workloads. Increased gang violence, hopelessness, and suicide ideation and completion were highlighted after two years of prolonged stress. The mental wellness response and recovery needs attention moving forward. The lack of facilities that address needs in a timely manner, such as detox and treatment centres, also needs to be addressed. We need mental wellness and healing and recovery centres to address our addictions and mental health.

I want to thank you for listening. I'm open to any questions you may have, and I'll do my best to respond in a timely manner.

I want to thank you for this opportunity.

● (1645)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mirasty.

We'll go to Mr. Tsannie for five minutes.

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee there, and my colleagues who are on the line.

My name's Joseph Tsannie of the Athabasca, vice chief of the Prince Albert Grand Council.

Happy Aboriginal Day to everybody.

I'm here in the minister's area: I'm in Whitehorse. We have a team from Hatchet Lake entering in the Yukon River Quest here today, competing tomorrow. They'll hopefully take the championship back to northern Saskatchewan, and I will be cheering them on. They came second in 2019. High water levels continue to be a challenge, but there are good spirits here, and we have some young folks ready for the competition.

I'm here in Yukon at the government buildings, where I'm taking this Zoom call.

I'm from the Hatchet Lake Denesuline first nation, in Treaty 10 territory. I'm currently vice-chief of the Prince Albert Grand Council. We have 12 member first nations for the 45,000-plus first nation members. Some services include health, education, housing and tech services, information technology, justice, policing, forestry and emergency services.

Our northern Saskatchewan communities include Hatchet Lake Denesuline first nation, the town of Wollaston, Black Lake, the hamlet of Stony Rapids, Fond du Lac Denesuline first nation, Uranium City and the town of Camsell Portage. We have access on gravel roads to our northern communities all the way up to Stony Rapids, and ice roads into Wollaston Lake and Fond du Lac give us access into some of the southern communities.

We own and operate an airline service in northern Saskatchewan, called Rise Air. It's owned by the 12 first nations within the Prince Albert Grand Council.

Today I'd like to focus on the need for search and rescue based in northern Saskatchewan. Our Dene people have been on the land for thousands of years. We are the experts and can respond to any emergency situation in harsh weather conditions in far northern regions. We continue to live off the land, and our elders continue to pass on traditional survival skills to our young people.

Our biggest resource is our young people. Seventy per cent of our total population is under the age of 25. Our young people are graduating and are desperately seeking opportunities, which are limited in northern Saskatchewan and in most northern parts of Canada, where some of the communities are isolated communities.

Our northern community has hosted several Wounded Warriors events for the Canadian military, and we are proud to treat them to our beautiful lakes and land in northern Saskatchewan.

We currently have Canadian Rangers in three of our first nations, Lac La Ronge Indian band, Hatchet Lake Denesuline first nation and Fond du Lac, and we are currently working on adding two more to our communities within the Prince Albert Grand Council.

Our communities that have Canadian Rangers are very proud to share knowledge and outdoor survival skills with our partners. Some of the capabilities of the Prince Albert Grand Council include our search and rescue recovery team, which is a community-based volunteer organization providing land and water search and rescue services. We are dedicated to providing the highest quality of search and rescue service. Our commitment is to provide all Saskatchewan first nations with qualified emergency management services. We have agreements and a good working relationship with the Red Cross. Saskatchewan First Nations Emergency Management looks after flooding, forest fires, spills and other threats to our communities, and we also provide the training.

The Saskatchewan first nations fire protective services technical assistance is technical assistance for Saskatchewan first nation wildfire protection.

As for some of the areas in northern Saskatchewan that we're advocating for and hoping to expand, we want to continue to build partnerships and relationships with the Canadian military, with ongoing meetings to identify challenges and threats to the north and the potential for search and rescue recovery training in remote response based in northern Saskatchewan.

● (1650)

That's the main area that I want.... I've been advocating and been making some connections on that search and rescue base in northern Saskatchewan. We have the airlines that we run. We wanted to do some aerial surveillance in the Arctic, and a central location in northern Saskatchewan is a perfect location to have a northern search and rescue base.

With regard to ground and water response capabilities, with our traditions, our elders and our navigation skills, we are in the perfect situation to provide those services. It's the opportunity for our young people to serve our country and an opportunity to provide them with meaningful and rewarding careers. As I said earlier, we have a high number of young graduates in our communities. They are our biggest resource.

In closing, on behalf of the Prince Albert Grand Council, I want to take the opportunity to thank everybody for getting me to present today and continue to advocate for building healthy and safe communities for all of our members. Again, our biggest resource is our young people.

We had an airplane crash in northern Saskatchewan a number of years ago, and luckily, it was just outside one of our communities. It was our people, the local rangers, who responded to that need.

Just imagine, with all the threats that are happening around the world right now, how well we are prepared. Who else is going to best respond with any services that are needed? We are capable in northern Saskatchewan. Our people are capable of responding in -40 weather, in harsh weather conditions, to navigate through those conditions and provide the search and rescue capability. We have the airlines, the young people and the resources to provide a lot of services, so we continue to advocate.

We are currently advocating and working with the Canadian Rangers, but we want a northern Saskatchewan search and rescue base. We have people who go missing on a weekly basis. Our people are always out there, but we need support from Canada to provide that service. We can provide that service up into the Northwest Passage, the Arctic, Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, etc.

We are here. We're willing partners, and we want that opportunity for our communities in northern Saskatchewan.

With that, thank you very much. I am here for any questions, and I am willing to make those connections to make this a reality.

Thank you to everybody who presented good points.

The Chair: Thank you, Vice-Chief Tsannie.

We'll now go to question period.

By the way, I apologize to the witnesses. We started a bit late, and I know we kept you waiting. We'll go through now with questions, up to six o'clock, which is our deadline.

We'll start the first round.

Mr. Vidal, you have the microphone for the next six minutes.

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

I want to start today by acknowledging that we are meeting today on National Indigenous Peoples Day in Canada.

From a personal perspective, I am thrilled to have representatives from the two largest tribal councils in my riding. I have Ms. Mirasty and Vice-Chief Tsannie here, representing 21 out of 25 first nations in my riding. I don't think it was planned that way, but it worked out very well to have them here, and I'm really excited about that. I want to welcome both of you.

Ms. Mirasty, I'm going to start with you, and then I'll get some time in with Vice-Chief Tsannie as well.

You gave us about 75 different things that we could talk about relative to the pandemic response, and there was so much there. I want to focus a bit, first of all, on emergency planning. You briefly mentioned emergency planning.

I know that for the nine first nations you represent, some are more remote than others. Could you share a bit about the emergency plans and what benefit they were—EMO coordination, and some of that? You talked about the North West Communities Incident Command Centre, which arose in the midst of the pandemic.

What has been learned about the importance of emergency plans not just being a plan on a shelf that collects dust, but something that is a vibrant document that is ready to go the next time we face an emergency, in your case in northwest Saskatchewan?

● (1655)

Ms. Marcia Mirasty: We've learned that emergency response plans need to be revised and updated on a continual basis as living documents. We have to update the changes that occur among our contacts—those in the provincial system, our federal contacts and those at the community level. There is a lot of turnover in staff, as well as a number of changes. There is a need for communication and working together.

With the wildfire that occurred last year in the Buffalo River Dene nation, there were some blips and learning experiences. It was challenging in that there was the added concern of COVID as evacuees were being taken out of the community and into Lloydminster. There was a COVID outbreak, and it was hard to manage that outbreak when the provincial guidelines became more relaxed. We needed to work closely and strongly together with the Saskatchewan health authorities, the SPSA and different representatives.

We're learning, and we're sharing information. We also have contractors, services and a relationship with the Canadian Red Cross. We're looking at this as best we can, because there is funding attached to emergency situations. We would like to explore the opportunities for services closer to home in terms of rescue situations and training. It's an evolving process of sharing with our fellow partners—Prince Albert Grand Council and NITHA—keeping abreast of fire and flooding situations, getting updates and keeping all our networks informed. We're doing the best we can to handle those emergent situations.

I hope I answered your question. I'm not sure I did.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that.

I know you're in the midst of it every day, and I appreciate the work you do.

I'm going to switch over to Vice-Chief Tsannie for one quick question. I will hopefully get back to you both a bit later.

Vice-Chief, just last week you faced an evacuation at Stanley Mission due to a forest fire in your territory. We're very thankful...I don't think anybody was hurt, and the rain came and helped deal with that more quickly than it has in the past.

One thing you and I have had conversations about in the past is access to your home community of Hatchet Lake and to Wollaston Lake Road, and how that is a potential impediment to emergency planning, especially in a forest fire situation. You had a fire there a few years ago.

Could you speak to the importance of road access as it leads to emergency planning for your home nation?

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: Thanks, Gary. It's good to see you.

With climate change, our ice road season is getting shorter. Like I said earlier, before this meeting, we're still missing two people who are presumed drowned after just trying to get across the lake. Three people drowned back in November. Also, a teacher went through the ice and the vehicle landed on the floating ice just under the water. There have been a lot of tragedies of people being lost just trying to get into the community.

With climate change, it's getting harder. We've been advocating to get that road built. Back in about 2012 we had the perfect storm. We had the fire surrounding the community, our airport wasn't operating, and you couldn't land planes because the fire was close to the community. We ended up getting helicopters to move people out of the community into Points North. We had a Hercules land in Points North, and we had to evacuate that way.

It's very important to have access. We had some commitment to get the road built and finished, but very little support. We're halfway done, but we need ongoing support to get the road finished. We're not asking for much. We're in the backyard of the biggest uranium deposits in northern Saskatchewan, and there's no reason we should continue to not have that road built.

For the last 30 or 40 years we've been advocating to get that road built. Why is it so hard? We're halfway there. The equipment is there. Why can't we continue to work on it this summer? That's what we've been saying to the ministers. We still haven't heard. Last week, they were supposed to meet with Minister Fox. We haven't heard back, or it's always, “Maybe, maybe.” There are millions of dollars coming out of our backyard, and we can't get this road finished. That's where we are.

We're always on top of it. With the Grand Council, I was there with our Red Cross and our Saskatchewan First Nations Emergency Management. We're on top of it, and we continue to provide that support for our communities. We've done it so many times that I feel like we're the experts in dealing with emergency management.

Thank you.

● (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Ms. Atwin for six minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair. I'd like to wish everybody a happy National Indigenous Peoples Day.

To anybody celebrating across Turtle Island and of course right here in unceded Wolastoqiyik territory, as my stepfather, Spasaqsit Possesom, grand chief, would say, it's a good day to be indigenous, and it's a good day for us allies to be reminded that we are all treaty people.

Of course, I would like to also mention to my fellow committee members that it's an honour to serve with all of you on this important committee.

Thank you so much to our witnesses for joining us today. I think what I'll do for my short time is start with Minister Mostyn.

You focused in on an issue that is very close to my heart, which is climate change, so I'd like to talk about the need for climate-resilient infrastructure. I'm wondering if you could give us a bit of insight into some of the conversations and planning that's happening around this, and more importantly, I think, how indigenous knowledge is informing that process.

Thank you.

Hon. Richard Mostyn: It's a good and very important question.

We're seeing the effects of climate change first-hand here in the north. Even this summer or this spring we saw the clay cliffs in Whitehorse collapse, knocking out one of the two access roads to downtown Whitehorse. In Ross River we are seeing a school underpinned by permafrost compromised in the small community there, which I was dealing with as highways minister for many years. The road to Alaska itself has permafrost issues, and it's very expensive for the territory to maintain, certainly to the standards that Alaska demands. We have about 250 to 300 people living on that north highway, and it's about $30 million a year to maintain. We just don't have those types of resources to do it.

We have to start looking at how we maintain our infrastructure in a way that.... Every dollar we spend on good infrastructure up front saves us $11 down the road in remediation and everything else. That's what I was told just the other day. It's very important—it's even just a basic responsibility—to look at these issues and deal with them before, head them off, and start building our infrastructure in a way that anticipates and deals with climate change.

In Old Crow we're building a new health centre. We're using climate change adaptive technologies to try to make sure that it's there. We're working with the first nation in Old Crow to do that.

The first nation in Old Crow, Vuntut Gwitchin, owns almost a controlling share in Air North, which is the northern airline, so it's a very sophisticated first nation. It has just built the largest solar panel array north of 60, and it's turning off its diesel power to bring down its own carbon footprint as a community. We helped with that, as did Ottawa. We're looking at technology to make sure we're cutting our greenhouse gases.

The other thing that's just happening is the Yukon government is going to be investing in a hydro development in Atlin, B.C., which, again, will cut our dependence on fossil fuels. We're working with the first nation in the region to do this.

Of course, we've been dealing with first nations through our Yukon Forum meeting with all of our first nations leaders every three months, and developing a rapport and a co-management in the territory that has not happened before. Every three months since we were elected we have held these Yukon Forums with all the indigenous leaders in the territory to discuss areas of mutual concern. Climate change, of course, comes up, and missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls. The last one, which we held in Old Crow just the other day, dealt with the lack of salmon returning to their spawning beds. These are heartrending discussions we're having with our indigenous leaders throughout the Yukon.

In terms of working together, I don't think you can manage the territory without that input into climate change, the salmon, or any of these issues. It's absolutely imperative that we work together as a unit. I really think the model works, and I can't imagine doing this job if I wasn't in regular contact with our first nation leaders and our municipal leaders as well. That's vital.

We're also rewriting our Civil Emergency Measures Act, which was last drafted...I think it's a year older than I am, so it's very old. We are going to rewrite that, and we're doing it with first nations and municipal leaders. They aren't even mentioned in that piece of legislation, by the way, and yet right now, for example, in Teslin—this is my last point—where we're fighting near historic levels of flooding in that community, it's the first nation and the municipal government working together that are putting together an absolutely remarkable flood defence. They are doing it with our support, of course, but we don't have to do a lot in that community, because the first nation and the municipality worked so well together getting those sandbags deployed. That's the sort of work together we have to do more of in this country.

● (1705)

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you so much.

I know my time is very limited, so I will ask a question really quickly to Vice-Chief Tsannie.

You mentioned something else that's close to my heart, and that's youth engagement. It is the most important resource.

How can we best engage this fastest-growing demographic as far as emergency preparedness and stepping up to what's needed in the north is concerned?

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: Our young people are, like I said, more than mining, more than any other resource that we have. Our young people are our biggest resource. Our job as leadership people who are at the decision-making tables is to open doors for our young people and give them opportunities.

What a great opportunity to have this northern Saskatchewan search and rescue base and get these people out on the land. We have a high rate of suicide in all of our first nations communities, and our young people are looking for and needing those opportunities. We've got to open the doors.

Our people are the best. They are out there in -40° or -50° weather. I used to sleep outside with my dad, going hunting in the Arctic in northern Canada. That's what we teach our children. How best do we respond to threats? If we need to navigate, we listen to the trappers, the people who are out on the land. Our young people are graduating high school with very few opportunities in northern Canada.

With the Canadian Rangers, there's some of it there, and they really enjoy that, being out on the land and sharing their knowledge, the survival skills. If we ever get any threats coming from the north, our people are the number one people to respond. They're going to be the ones who are going to be called upon for food and for services that are needed and certain capabilities I'm pretty sure you don't have.

I experienced it. I have family who go into the north, and they have accidents. I go out there and respond to some of these emergency services, and I called 911 from out in the boonies, up in the Arctic. They said, “Vice-Chief, I don't know what to tell you. I don't know how to help you.” I said, “These people are going to be dying if we don't respond.” For three days people get stuck in the Athabasca sand dunes without any emergency response. Planes can't land, so what do you do? Nothing? People get into snowmobile accidents when they're hunting, or somebody gets hurt and you can't respond to them for three or four days? That's not acceptable.

We have those capabilities, and somebody has to make that call and say, “Yes, get our people out there.” I think it's the RCMP, at the end of the day, that has to make that call. We have that capability. If we have support, we can provide that support in northern Canada, and our young people are just so eager to get out there and show what they can potentially do.

Thank you for that question. I think it's very important.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We will continue with Ms. Gill.

Ms. Gill, you have the floor.

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I too wish to thank all of the witnesses.

My first question is for Mr. Coates.

Despite a critical if not cynical tone, which I understand given the situation, you have mentioned multiple avenues for solutions. In addition to funding, there are the issues of the military, food security and infrastructure.

You mentioned a word that I had not heard before in this committee, the word “strategy”. Obviously, when you want to solve a complex problem, you have tools to achieve your goals. As a historian, do you know if there has ever been any kind of strategy for Arctic sovereignty?

How do you see the possibility of a strategy? What might it look like?

I know this is a multi-part question, but I'll give you plenty of time to answer, Mr. Coates.

● (1710)

[*English*]

Dr. Ken Coates: That's a very important question. I guess I did come across as a bit cynical.

As a historian, I see that we've gone down this path many times before. We've had a whole series of Arctic strategies over the years. Governments of different stripes have come forward and said, “Here's our plan.” Ten years later, the north moves forward, but it moves forward at a slower pace than the rest of the country. In fact, the gap between northern Canada and southern Canada gets bigger rather than smaller. You are making some progress in terms of improving opportunities for northern peoples, but as we've heard Marcia and the vice-chief say, it's not exactly working out terribly well.

Can you do a strategy? The short answer is yes. Where would you do this? Well, I just got back from taking a group of students from northern Canada across northern Norway, where there are a whole series of strategies that actually link up military and resource activity; the approach to Sami studies and Sami affairs, the indigenous peoples of northern Norway; and community development overall.

This is going to make the vice-chief feel very sad, but I went through one tunnel today on the Faeroe Islands that cost more than the total amount of money put into the roads in northern Saskatchewan, probably, in the last decade, and that's only one of many tunnels in the Faeroe Islands. Northern Norway has dozens of these things.

Northern Norway put these pieces together. I think you're asking the right question. It isn't just the military. It isn't just infrastructure. When you look at other countries, from northern Australia to Greenland, the military investment is done with a view to the infrastructure needs of society as a whole. You build a road, perhaps, in a slightly different place. You use the military to develop some sort of an energy system that then is applied to the non-military population. You link up the innovation strategies and the scientific work with the absolute needs of the community.

I really like the question about indigenous knowledge, because the other part of this is that we're doing many of these things, and then we basically ask the indigenous people after the plans have been formulated. If we've learned anything, and Yukon is the best example of this, certainly for the last decade or so, it is that first nations people, Métis people and Inuit people should be at the table from the beginning, setting the priorities and making the decisions alongside public governments and the non-indigenous population. You can leapfrog ahead under those circumstances. That's strategic planning. That's actually looking and saying, “What resources do we have? What challenges do we have? What are the priorities? What do we do first, second, and third?”

What we do now is basically.... Sometimes the territorial government goes in one direction. The provincial government, and you heard the challenge in Saskatchewan, doesn't pay a lot of attention to the provincial north, unfortunately, or not as much as it should. Governments go in different directions, and different departments within governments go in different directions.

As I say, I've been travelling in the circumpolar world for the last month. I'll tell you, if you spend even a couple of weeks up there, you'll feel very badly about how we're doing in Canada in the provincial and territorial north, because we haven't had an effective strategy.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Coates.

Mr. Chair, I would like to ask Mr. Coates another question.

Mr. Coates, at the beginning of your speech you talked about circumpolar standards, and you just referred to them again. The countries that border the Arctic are obviously not the same size or population. They also do not necessarily have the same opportunities.

How do you rate Canada's standards compared to other states bordering the Arctic?

● (1715)

[*English*]

Dr. Ken Coates: You're right to say they're very different. Canada has phenomenal unrealized potential, but it also has very formidable challenges. If we had colleagues with us at the table from Nunavut.... The dispersed population, the vast distances and the extreme cold are very different from what you see in northern Norway, for example.

If you go across the circumpolar world you discover a couple of things.

Russia is spending a staggering amount of money. Russia has floating nuclear power plants in the Arctic waters. Is anybody here ready to propose that for northern Canada? It's not going to happen. Authoritarian states can get away with all sorts of things because they don't have to go through the processes that democratic nations have.

Northern Norway, Finland and Scandinavia in general have a simple commitment that regardless of where you are in a country, you'll have a comparable level of services—paved roads to all the communities, good Internet coverage, good electricity coverage and good health care—basically regardless of where you are in any of those countries.

Greenland has made remarkable transitions over the last 20 years, based on the revival of the Greenlandic people, who are the Inuit cousins of folks from Nunavut. They are doing a remarkable job of re-establishing control of their own jurisdiction and moving towards likely full autonomy in time.

The minister talked about Alaska. The numbers I saw were that the department of national defence industries in the United States spend more money in Alaska than the entire Canadian defence industry. It is massively militarized. When Alaska says that it has great infrastructure, great roads, great Internet and all that kind of stuff, it's because it has a massive military presence that goes back to the Cold War. It has a foundation that makes prosperity relatively easy to achieve, because it has the underpinnings of that remarkable military spending.

How do we stand up in the Canadian north? It's not very well, to be honest. I don't mean that to be cynical. I look at my colleagues—the vice-chief and Marcia—and at the work they do. The effort they put in is absolutely staggering. It is difficult to feel comfortable with how we're doing in the Canadian north, to be honest.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Ms. Idlout.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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Thank you for your response.

I had other questions, but you replied to most of them.

I will ask you this again. For instance, Marcia talked about mental wellness and supporting indigenous peoples in healing each other in the areas of mental illness or mental wellness. How can we support indigenous people in communities in the area of mental wellness?

We need mental health resources. Mental wellness has to be addressed. We want to help ourselves in our own communities and in our own language, without mental health workers and psychologists, and to not be dependent on outside expertise but on the community, which would be capable of taking care of mental illness and wellness.

[*English*]

Dr. Ken Coates: Boy, have you ever touched on something really important. We have some creative solutions. Yukon University is doing some excellent community-based training and preparation. The minister can probably tell us way more about that than I know.

My university, the University of Saskatchewan, has nursing programs that are based in the community. Community members work and get their whole nursing degree while they're in that town. They stay home and they stay there to work afterwards. The retention rate is much higher.

The other part that's really interesting is that we haven't really.... The vice-chief mentioned this in his comments. There is a healing and redemptive power in connecting with the land. When we go through the whole impact of colonization, school systems and everything else, one of the things that's happened is that many young indigenous people, even in the north, are not well connected to the land. They just don't have enough time to get out there. We need to reinvent education and let indigenous people reinvent education for their own purposes.

On the mental health side, there are two things I would add. One of them is that the elders are, perhaps, the most potent medicine that the communities have available to them, if you can use them constructively and collaboratively.

However, we are discovering some interesting things to do with new technologies. Some of the better suicide prevention strategies in North America use cellphones, which is disconcerting on one level—I'm not a fan of social media. They're using cellphones to stay in touch with people. They monitor young people's activities and can notice the signs of depression and suicidal thoughts by sites they're visiting and things they're saying to each other and their friends. You can do great preventative health.

The vice-chief might want to speak to this, but I think there is a sadness among young people in the north. It is because of the absence of clear job paths and career opportunities. The good news is that young indigenous women are doing really quite well, and better all the time. Young indigenous men are doing less well all the time.

The vice-chief made a comment, almost in passing, about the high suicide rates. Every one of those is a community tragedy of the highest proportions. You all know that.

How do we stop that? How do we get them on a positive track and give young people the hope and sense of optimism that they deserve? All Canadians deserve that, and indigenous people in the north deserve it every bit as much as anybody else.

● (1725)

The Chair: Thank you.

We're now going to go to a second round. I have to admit, I've been a bit loose on the timing here. Everybody's gone way over time. I'm going to be a bit tougher this time, so I'm telling both the committee members and the witnesses not to take it personally when I cut them off.

Mr. Zimmer, you have five minutes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to be at INAN again.

Happy National Indigenous Peoples Day to everybody out there. I'll get right into it.

Mr. Coates, I can completely relate to what you and other experts on the Arctic, Mr. Huebert and Wallace, have been talking about. I really appreciate you guys for digging into this.

I was in Inuvik last week, at our most active NORAD location in the Arctic, and I was alarmed by what I saw. There have been many concerns regarding Canadian sovereignty and security from our territorial and provincial premiers, and I heard the same first-hand from many of our northern indigenous residents.

An article in SaskToday, from April, reads:

> [Premier] Silver, as Chair of the Northern Premiers, called an impromptu meeting of those...leaders. Following that, Silver, N.W.T Premier Caroline Cochrane and Nunavut Premier P.J. Akeeagok wrote a joint letter to British Columbia Premier John Horgan and the other premiers requesting space on the agenda of the Council of the Federation's...summer meeting.

This is all about Arctic sovereignty and security.

Premier Silver said:

> It's time that Canada does the same. Russian actions are threatening global security, and the international rules-based order.

Instead of strengthening sovereignty and security in our Arctic, I saw this government putting up a "for sale" sign on a crucial NORAD facility known as "the green hangar" in Inuvik, and getting rid of other essential equipment. For decades, the International Logistical Support hangar has been the only facility above the Arctic Circle able to house the refuelling tankers that support Canada's CF-18s. This critical NORAD facility was said by this government in 2021 to be no longer necessary. The hangar is now up for sale, and other countries, namely China, are showing interest.

Without this hangar, the refuelling tankers are being pushed outside and now take three or more hours to prep in winter conditions. Any quick response is now virtually impossible in the Arctic.

Mr. Coates, are you aware of this vulnerability? What should be done about it?

Dr. Ken Coates: I did actually know this was happening. I think the government just announced what it called a modernization of NORAD, which I hope will involve addressing some of those kinds of issues, but we lag so far behind other nations.

It's interesting to compare two places. One is northern Norway, where they live with the threat of Russia very close at hand, and the other is northern Australia, where the dangers of China and Russia are very far away. In both of those areas, they have a long-standing military presence in the region. They're prepared for uncertainty. Now we face uncertainty. Are we prepared? No, we're not. Can we do better? We can do way better.

Ask yourself the question—not you personally, sir—why Canadians care so little. These questions have been coming up since the 1950s. Why do we care so little? Whitehorse used to have a very substantial military presence, and it's gone.

● (1730)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Coates, I've seen the same. I've done posts on social media that get a lot of attention, and Arctic sovereignty and security, frankly, are in the lower end of responses. I agree with you that we need to elevate the issue.

Speaking about the grandiose announcement of almost $5 billion for NORAD and part of our Arctic sovereignty and security, I'll bring up Nanisivik, which is a project that's been long promised but not delivered. This government has been in power for six years, and it's still unrealized.

This is an article from CTV, titled “Military hopeful new Arctic port will open in 2022, but 'significant' uncertainty remains”. It says, “The Canadian military says there are no guarantees that its long-delayed Arctic naval station will finally open next year, prompting defence critics to call the ongoing construction delays confounding and dangerous.”

Mr. Coates, I'll go back to you. A lot of promises can be made. They've been made in the past by this government—another $4 billion or $5 billion and 20 more years—but it's about promises versus outcomes.

Maybe just comment on that. What needs to be done to see these promises made into outcomes?

Dr. Ken Coates: The short thing is you need Canadians to really care about this.

What happens is that Canada gets interested in the north when somebody threatens it, whether it's the Russians or the Americans. When somebody sort of raises their head, whether it's the *Polar Sea* or the *Manhattan* voyages from the 1970s and 1980s, we get all agitated. We say we're going to do something, and then we don't. We lose interest and we lose focus.

When I say that, of course it's partly the governments that are not following up, but it's also the Canadian public. One of the realities is that Canadians are a southern-focused nation, living mostly close to the Canada-U.S. border. Not very many people live as far north as our colleagues here from Saskatchewan or the minister from the Yukon, so we just don't care.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Coates.

We'll go to Mr. Powlowski.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): In this study, we're looking at Arctic sovereignty, but also indigenous security and emergency preparedness.

I want to ask a couple of people about the issue of jurisdiction, and how much that is or isn't a problem. I am a member of Parliament for Thunder Bay-Rainy River, which is in northern Ontario. Certainly northern Ontario includes a lot of indigenous communities, which have constant problems with flooding and fires. In looking at this in my own riding, and at who has responsibility and jurisdiction, I always find it a bit confusing.

I want to ask Mr. Tsannie, in northern Saskatchewan, who has jurisdiction? You talked about Saskatchewan emergency management, and it sounded like they were the ones in charge there, working with indigenous communities.

Does Indigenous Services have a role in that, or do they reimburse Saskatchewan emergency management? How does that work? Is there a problem with jurisdiction? Is there more of a problem with indigenous communities than with non-indigenous communities in terms of figuring out who has responsibility?

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: We've done work with emergency services, and certainly our first nations and our local leadership has that jurisdiction. At the end of the day, if the chief or the community decides they need to evacuate, it's the chief that makes the call.

We've been working, and I think it's about building relationships. The very important thing is building relationships and walking side by side with decision-makers—the people who are sitting around the table. It's working together and finding common understanding and being able to build partnerships. That's why I say we have the partnership with the Red Cross. We have the partnership and agreements with the police and the province. We work together as best we can. Certainly there are differences, but at the end of the day it's about the safety of our communities.

It's off-loaded to the province, and the province provides the services to our first nations, but we have agreements. We respond to any emergency services. We want to have that control. If our people have to be evacuated, it's our first nations along with our organization, the Prince Albert Grand Council first nations emergency management services, that we provide for our communities.

It's a partnership and an understanding of the willingness to work together. It works best that way.

Thank you.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I take it, then, that you work with the province, and the province provides the resources but ultimately recovers those resources from Indigenous Services?

● (1735)

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: If the province provided that service to our first nations, it recovered it through the feds. If we have to respond along with our first nations, it's through the feds that we recover some of those expenses—through the tribal council, with the tribal council's support.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Perhaps I can ask the same question of Mr. Mostyn.

Who has jurisdiction, and who pays, at the end of the day?

Hon. Richard Mostyn: That's a very good question.

As a territorial government, we provide support to our first nation communities and municipalities. Within municipal boundaries, it's a lot clearer, these days. They're responsible for emergency response within their municipal boundaries. The same holds true for our self-governing first nations.

The problem is that we're talking about very small communities—communities with 200 people. Some of them are really capable of providing that support. Where they're not, the Yukon government plays a much more active role.

We have actually enlisted the aid of first nation wildfire participants across the territory. All first nations are contributing resources to that initiative now. We're working very closely together with municipalities and first nation governments to support them. The numbers are so very small that we really have to. We recover the money from Ottawa in the end.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: There will probably be no answer to this.

Mr. Coates, several times during your testimony, you suggested that the plight of the northern parts of provinces—northern Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan—was, in some ways, worse than that of the far north, north of 60. Do you want to elaborate on that, or did I get you wrong? I know we have several representatives from north of 60 here, so you may want to remember that when you're replying.

The Chair: You have about 25 seconds.

Dr. Ken Coates: I mean no ill will toward the territorial north whatsoever.

The amount of money that goes into the northern provinces is much smaller than what's available in Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, by a very dramatic scale. The northern territories have modern treaties and agreements, comprehensive arrangements, and huge transfers of hundreds of millions of dollars into the region. That hasn't happened in the provincial north at all. There's a vast difference in authority, resources and opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to play devil's advocate a little bit. Last week we had a witness, Mr. Thompson, from the Government of the Northwest Territories. In the face of some resurgent crises, which some say are related to climate change, he said that we might have to consider moving some communities.

I would like to hear from Ms. Mirasty and Vice-Chief Tsannie on this.

How do you perceive this type of solution for certain specific cases?

[*English*]

The Chair: Do you want to start, Ms. Mirasty?

Ms. Marcia Mirasty: I think that if first nation leadership was given the choice to move, and if the federal government provided infrastructure supports, they would move to their traditional lands. The community that comes to mind, right off the bat, is English River First Nation. They were moved from Dipper Lake and Clear Lake into the area of English River, more for government ease in building houses and road construction. Our people have a strong connection to the land. They go back to the traditional territories they came from and where they feel connected. If it was an option, provided the infrastructure was in place and supported, there are definitely families who would like to return to their homelands.

The Chair: Vice-Chief, you have about 30 seconds.

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: We've seen what happened in northern Manitoba with Tadoule Lake—how they were relocated into Churchill and how devastating that was. We don't want to learn from the past mistakes done to our people. Our people...where they live, that's their home. There are people who live in swampy areas, with lots of high water levels. That's their home. That's the Swampy Cree. The Dene people live off the land. It's not just one area. It's the whole region. Our land base is within 100 kilometres of Baker Lake, Northwest Territories. That's where our people are buried. That's our home.

Provide the support in terms of housing needs. Climate change is going to happen. I can't see any of our communities.... Not once did they mention they wanted to be relocated. They're happy where they are.

● (1740)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Idlout, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

ᖃᓄᖅᓭᓗᒃ, ᐊᑦ, ᒪᖃᓕᐊᒪ, ᐊᑦ, ᑭᐅᑦᓪᓚᐅᖃᓐᓄᓂ, ᐊᑦ, ᓴᐃᖅ ᓕᑦ ᓄᓕᓕ vice chief Joseph ᑭᐅᖃᒃᑕᐅᔨᓄᖅᑲᖅᑕ ᐅᒥᖏᒐ ᐊᐱᓚᒃᓄᓂᒃ, ᐊᖏᑦᖃᒃᑕᐅᒪᒪᖏᖃᒃᐱᑦ ᑕᒪᒃᑯᐊ ᕿᖃᓄᐃᓕᓕᑦᓪᓕᓕᐊᓕᖅᑎᓗᑎᑦ ᑐᐊᐱᖃᓄᖃᒃᑐᓚᓂᓕᖅᒥᒃ ᐃᓚᖏᑦ ᑕᒪᓄᓄ ᕿᖃᓄᐃᓂᓂᒃ ᐃᓚᓕᑎᑦᖃᒃᑕᐅᒋᐊᖃᖏᒪᖏᖃᓐᓇᑦ, ᐊᑦ, ᓄᓇᖃᖅᑲᖃᖅᓭᒪᔨᐃᑦ ᓇᒪᒥᓂᒃ ᓄᓇᖃᖅᑲᖃᖅᓭᒪᔨᖃᖅᑎᓗᒃᑖᓂᒃ ᐃᑲᔪᐳᓇᖃᓕᖅᑎᑕᐅᖃᖅᓯᐅᑎᓂᑦ ᒪᓄᓇᐅᔨᓂᒃ ᐊᑐᖃᑕᐅᔨᓂᒃ ᓇᒪᒻᓄᖏᐊᓂᓄᖏᓐᓂᒃ ᓯᖃᓗ ᒪᓄᓇ ᐊᑐᖃᑕᐅᔨᑦ ᕿᐃᕿᖃᑦᑕᖃᓕᔨᑦ, ᐊᑦ, ᐃᓅᓭᓪᓚᓴᑦ, ᐊᑦ, ᑐᓄᖏᓚᐱᕆᐅᓂᖃᖅᓴᐅᑲᑕᐅᖃᓴᒐ ᑕᑲᓭᒥᖏ ᑭᐅᔨᓄᓇᖃᖅᑐᐃᓄᓇᐅᔨᔪᓂᓗ.

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

I will ask Marcia first, and then I will ask Vice-Chief Joseph Tsannie.

Do you agree that as a part of all emergency preparedness planning, a portion of that needs to include help to enable indigenous people to help each other, rather than the status quo of relying mainly on academically graduated mental health professionals?

Marcia and then the vice-chief.

[*English*]

Ms. Marcia Mirasty: I agree with you. I believe that community-based resources are the most effective, because they know their people and they know the culture, the traditions and the language. They are connected. The issue that is highlighted at times is confidentiality and trust within our own people because of past grievances. It's about the training programs that can be provided to our people and assurances that mental health and emergency services will be provided in a professional and confidential manner. If there is a need for confidentiality, our people are the best to do it, in the communities, with their culture, with their language and with their traditions.

The Chair: Vice-Chief.

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: Can you repeat the question?

Ms. Lori Idlout: I'll say it in English, just for time's sake.

Do you agree that as a part of all emergency preparedness planning, a portion of that needs to include help to enable indigenous people to help each other, rather than the status quo of relying mainly on academically graduated mental health professionals?

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: Again, I think it's about coming together and making those decisions together. It doesn't matter where you come from or what your background is; it's about coming together—that willingness. That's what reconciliation is about for me, being able to work together collectively. It's not just first nations' problems, and it's not just the federal government's. It's together. This is our country. We have to come together and make a collective decision together for the best of everybody. Then we can all be accountable.

With our neighbours down south, if we can work together in terms of finding the solution for our communities, because we're all interrelated.... For gang activity, drug activities in our communities, we all share those same issues. If we can come together and come up with solutions, we do that to a certain point, but I think we need to do it collectively. This is not just a one-nation problem. Collectively, as Canadians, we all have to be accountable. We all have to be willing partners. It's the same as being married to your spouse. I think we have to work together.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Vice-Chief.

Mr. Vidal, you have five minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Mirasty, I'm going to ask you to make a clear statement on this because I have limited time. I'm going to try to get you to do this in a couple of minutes or less.

When you were talking about your SWOT analysis, one of the weaknesses you talked about was lockdowns. Under the threats you talked about working from home.

I want you to make a statement, so we get it on the record and so we know in the future, if we were ever to face something similar to what we did with the COVID-19 pandemic, what your recommendation would be for the communities that you serve, to respond to things like lockdowns and working from home.

Ms. Marcia Mirasty: Number one, we need to have the infrastructure in place. We need to have cell towers and connectivity so that we can stay connected to our contacts in the communities and provide the opportunity for home-schooling, educational opportunities and mental health supports. We also need to pivot and be flexible and find ways to meet the mandates of our programs and services in a unique setting that is highly reliant on virtual technologies. Basically, it's serving our people and meeting their needs when there are vast distances.

For the Meadow Lake Tribal Council, our furthest first nation is three and a half hours away. If there are lockdowns and we're not able to travel, we have to be able to guide and direct our first nations and work with them to get their advice and their direction virtually. I would say that the connectivity, the high-speed Internet and the cell towers are key in working from home and meeting the needs of our community members.

● (1745)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that answer.

I was going to ask Vice-Chief Tsannie this question, but I think, Vice-Chief, you've done a great job of advocating for the Canadian Rangers in northern Saskatchewan, so I'll change this up a bit.

Dr. Coates, you're obviously a very knowledgeable gentleman. Would you speak to the suggestion that Vice-Chief Tsannie has made about a Canadian Rangers base in northern Saskatchewan? Do you believe that would be beneficial for many of the reasons the vice-chief has already so admirably advocated in his presentation today?

Dr. Ken Coates: The vice-chief has spoken about two things. He has spoken about the rangers and the role they could play in the defence of the north and the first alerts, but he's also talked about search and rescue capabilities based in northern Saskatchewan, with the ability to reach way up into the Arctic. I concur with both of those things.

This is a classic example of where we have to look at the long-term and multiple effects of something. Taking on something like that could be enriching for the communities and bring spirit, pride and enthusiasm to the young people. I've been with the folks in La Ronge and have watched what the young people do there. They are so excited about the activities. They have a similar arrangement in the Yukon, where there are ranger groups up there. I'm sure the minister has worked with them. There's passion and energy. This actually brings life to those young people.

Don't just do it because of search and rescue or because of military preparedness. Do it because of all the other things that come along with a comprehensive approach.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that.

I have a bit of time left, so, Vice-Chief, you are going to get the last word on this.

Vice-Chief, get on the record again your advocacy for a Canadian Rangers base in northern Saskatchewan.

Talk until the chair cuts you off, please.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Vice Chief Joseph Tsannie: We have those capabilities already. We're doing some of the work already in terms of search and rescue. We find the people who can't be found. I've been to Ottawa with the military and checked out this high-definition camera that can see 40 kilometres away—infrared, through smoke. We want those capabilities. It takes two weeks to train a student to operate that camera. We have the biggest resources in our young people. Who best can survive in the northern regions than our people? We can provide that service.

As you said, I'm not looking for combat people. I'm looking for support. We can deliver fuel into the Arctic. We can provide ground support. We can provide the food, if needed, in certain situations. We have the people. We have the capabilities. We can provide the support that's going to be needed in case of emergency.

We're a willing partner. We have the airlines. We have the young people. We have the technology. We have the companies to build our capacity. We need the support and we need to strategize, as we've said, and come together.

I think at the end of the day, the feds, the provinces and the first nations can come together in the Arctic to strategize and come up with the best solution for our northern communities. I want to go to the Arctic. I love the north so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Vice-Chief.

We're going to conclude with five minutes from Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. What a fascinating committee to be subbed in on today.

To all of our witnesses, thank you for your expert testimony and all of your comments. Your absolute love of the north is very evident when we hear you speak.

Minister Mostyn, I think most of us can agree that climate change impacts every single one of us, but the north is disproportionately impacted. You see the fires and you see the floods. You spoke about the partnerships—municipal, provincial, first nations and the federal government—and I salute you for those partnerships. I recognize that all orders of government have had to step up to the plate to invest in climate change mitigation and better infrastructure.

Minister, what action is your provincial government taking, and what investments are you making in order to mitigate the impacts of climate change? I'm curious to know whether there's anything you want to elaborate on and, as Mr. Vidal said, get on the record.

● (1750)

Hon. Richard Mostyn: That's an important question.

We are spending an enormous amount of money, hundreds of millions of dollars over the next 10 years, on climate change. We have a plan called Our Clean Future. I believe it's a nation-leading plan. I know there are probably others out there, but I'm really proud of what we've done here in the territory with so few resources. It is measurable, and we report every year on what we're doing. It has hundreds of recommendations and timelines for implementation.

We've declared a climate emergency up here, and when you do that, you're actually declaring that all other things, in the face of this emergency that we're facing, are secondary. We have to look through that lens to make sure we're dealing with the emergency we have.

We're looking at putting in a program that will help Yukoners cut their heating bills, because heating provides an awful lot of greenhouse gases. The territory produces a lot of greenhouse gases, so we're looking at ways to have residents make their homes more energy-efficient, cutting the cost of heating in these days of skyrocketing diesel and gas prices.

We're looking at expanding our power grid and putting in green energy. I mentioned Old Crow. We're putting in battery storage in Whitehorse, again with the help of the federal government. We have first nations across the territory putting in solar and wind power stations. We are working very closely with our first nations to increase their local emergency management capability and climate resiliency, to support them in developing robust emergency plans.

It's been inspiring to see the resilience and leadership shown by Yukon first nations, and local governments throughout the territory, through the unprecedented number of emergencies we've had in the last several years.

As I said, every dollar we spend in preventing and building better infrastructure, more efficient homes, more efficient recreation facilities and more efficient roads is going to pay huge dividends on the back end, because it's enormously expensive to replace the roads that are getting washed out and to replace the schools in a community of 250 people. Building a school in that community is going to be in excess of $40 million. How do you do that? We have to make sure we're building these facilities in ways that survive the climate crisis we're in.

I'll leave it there, as there's so much to do.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you, Minister.

Do you generally feel that you're well-supported by the federal government as one of your key partners?

Hon. Richard Mostyn: The support the territorial government has received from our federal partners has been absolutely extraordinary. The infrastructure programs that the federal government has implemented in the north, these nation-building infrastructure programs, have been absolutely essential to the territory.

We pulled on the federal government. We spent every cent the federal government has sent our way. There's $1 billion in other programs that haven't been funded yet. The need is absolutely great, but the federal government has been extraordinary in building our roads and bridges, and preparing us for the changing climate we have. So much more is needed, unfortunately.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Mr. Chair, I see I have 19 seconds left. I'll cede that time. It's hard to get a question and answer.

Minister Mostyn, thank you so very much for all the work you do, and, again, my hat's off to all of the witnesses today for your expert testimony. I certainly appreciate it.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and let me echo that as well. This is our last meeting before we break until the fall and continue with this study, which is by no means complete. It has been a real pleasure to have four really great witnesses today, with each of you having your own area of expertise and experience.

On this National Indigenous Peoples Day, it couldn't be a better way for us to finish off our work until we meet again in the fall.

Thank you very much for your patience in waiting for us, and for your testimony, your opening remarks and your very candid answers to all of our questions.

The meeting is adjourned.