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Chair: Mr. Patrick Weiler



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 111 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

I want to start by recognizing that we are meeting on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples and express gratitude that we're able to do the important work of this committee on lands that they've stewarded since time immemorial.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Wednesday, April 10, 2024, the committee is meeting to continue its study on "Report 2, Housing in First Nations Communities" of the 2024 reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

Before I begin, I would like to ask that all members and other in-person participants consult the cards on the table for guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents. Please take note of the following preventative measures in place to protect the health and safety of all participants, including the interpreters. Only use a black, approved earpiece. The former gray earpieces must no longer be used. Keep your earpiece away from all microphones at all times. When you're not using your earpiece, place it face down on the sticker placed on the table for this purpose.

Thank you to all for your co-operation.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning connection tests for witnesses, I am informing the committee that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of this meeting, and I hope, Mr. Lemire, that your connection will be sufficient to get going.

With that, I would like to welcome our witnesses today. We have the Honourable Patty Hajdu, Minister of Indigenous Services; and the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities. They are accompanied by, from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, Nadine Leblanc; and, from the Department of Indigenous Services, Candice St-Aubin.

Ministers, you will each have the floor for five minutes starting with Minister Hajdu.

Hon. Patty Hajdu (Minister of Indigenous Services): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much to the committee for having me back yet again. I think it's my third time in the last few weeks, and it's a joy to be with you here on the unceded and unsundered territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe.

I am hoping that, the next time I come back, we will be talking about the clean water act. The first nations clean water act is a very important piece of legislation that this committee will have the privilege of studying, and the AFN and other parties have been very clear. They're asking all parties to move quickly to get the bill to committee so that we can listen to witnesses. I hope that we will not see continued blockage of this bill by any party, because this is a deeply important piece of legislation to many first nations across the country.

[Translation]

That said, let's talk about the Auditor General's report, which shows how important it is to partner with first nations.

This is not a new problem. It's a problem that far too many indigenous people have experienced their entire lives. It is the result of decades of colonialism and oppression, and proves an important point: Racism is costly.

Today, the bill for the infrastructure deficit is \$350 billion. Let's be clear: Progress is being made, but the problem won't be resolved overnight. It's going to take an effort on the part of all levels of government, organizations and private companies.

[English]

We have to do away with the archaic, one-size-fits-all systems that are often in place. They are not only deeply insulting to first nations, but they simply don't work. We all remember the paternalistic \$300-million fund that the Leader of the Opposition oversaw when he was minister. That program did not work, either. It got exactly 99 homes built on reserve for \$300 million.

This is why first nations' housing solutions must be developed by or co-developed with first nations themselves and they must be flexible so they can meet the specific needs of each community.

That's what the national first nations housing and related infrastructure strategy is all about. It was co-developed with the AFN, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and first nations across Canada. It's a clear contrast with the paternalistic approach. It will get us closer to a Canada where first nations also have a safe place to rest, to raise their children and to reach their full potential.

Recently, I was in Lytton First Nation. They're making giant steps in rebuilding after a devastating wildfire. With new funding, 20 homes are being fast-tracked and they plan to build over 175 homes over the next decade. This is no coincidence. Indeed, since we took office in 2015, Liberals increased targeted funding and housing by 1,100% and budget 2024 adds another \$1 billion.

Equally important, the tools that we're developing together with first nations people are restoring control of housing back to communities. We've supported the First Nations Housing Professionals Association to train people on project management, construction planning, tenant relations and renovation coordination. They've certified 48 housing professionals. They have an additional 151 people in training and this is to build housing capacity in first nations communities across the country.

I saw that in action in Lytton. In fact, they said the speed at which they've been able to develop the division and get the infrastructure in place so the housing could be put into place for families who lost their homes in that devastating wildfire was because of internal capacity within the community.

The difference between the Liberal approach and the Conservative attitude is clear. Conservatives are stuck in paternalistic thinking, combined with a spin of austerity.

On our end, we focus on closing the gap through partnership and mutual respect. It's the right thing to do in the spirit of reconciliation, but it's also the only approach that works. It's the only way that we can ensure a fairer future and a fairer Canada for indigenous peoples.

Meegwetch. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister Hajdu.

Next up, we will give the floor to Minister Fraser for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Housing, Infrastructure and Communities): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Colleagues, I am pleased to be here to discuss the important issue of housing for indigenous and northern communities. This issue is important not only for the government, but also for the entire country.

[*English*]

I want to say thanks so much for having me.

It's clear that Canada's experiencing a housing crisis and that crisis is felt disproportionately by indigenous communities across Canada. When I hear about the challenges and when I speak with those who are most impacted, they tell me stories of overcrowding in their communities and of risks to health that can manifest as a

result of that overcrowding. They tell me about a seeming lack of understanding of those of us who come from the south about the challenges when it comes to the actual process of building in Canada's north.

We see a disproportionate representation of indigenous peoples amongst homeless Canadians.

It's essential that we acknowledge where we are if we're going to get where we want to be.

We've seen over the course of Canada's history a lack of investment that would be necessary to actually close the gap when it comes to the housing needs amongst indigenous peoples in this country and everyone else. The housing crisis, over the course of the past year or so, has really captured the attention of Canadians, but I think there's still insufficient light being shone upon the extraordinary needs of indigenous communities across Canada.

We've taken a step in a new direction—

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Chair, I'm sorry to interrupt the minister, but there is no interpretation into French.

[*English*]

The Chair: We'll just pause for a second to make sure the interpretation is working.

Can we continue?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Can you confirm the translation's working?

[*Translation*]

I'm getting a thumbs-up, so I'll continue.

[*English*]

We took a step in a new direction a number of years ago, not only with a significant increase in funding, as Minister Hajdu described, but also by more and more ensuring that we are empowering indigenous communities and indigenous leaders to take decisions about the investments that will support indigenous communities.

I see Mr. Battiste from Nova Scotia here. This approach in other areas has delivered immense dividends. I'm thinking of the education reforms that were put in place a number of years ago in Nova Scotia that dramatically increased graduation rates when decision-making power over the education system was put in the hands of indigenous communities.

We aim to do more of that with the distinctions-based approach that we've taken toward new funding with \$4 billion behind it to build out more housing in communities. With the approach to urban, rural and northern communities, it's going to, again, work with distinctions-based organizations but also with an indigenous-led centre that will help make decisions about where the funding goes.

It's not enough to just change the process. You actually have to back these programs up with serious money.

As Minister Hajdu indicated, we've seen a 1,100% increase in the total funding going to initiatives specifically for indigenous housing. This also comes through programs that may involve bilateral agreements with other levels of government that make investments directly in communities. It would include affordable housing initiatives through the affordable housing fund or the rapid housing initiative. About 40% of the investments have gone to support indigenous housing initiatives. We've seen significant uptake of the housing accelerator fund with partners that lead indigenous communities.

These investments are starting to make a difference, but I'm not here to tell you that the problem has been solved. I'm here to tell you that we need to continue to do more. With consistent and predictable investments, we'll be able to create an ecosystem where we are doing a better job of meeting the demands that dramatically and disproportionately impact indigenous communities. We have more work to do to ensure that we not only meet the housing needs but also create opportunities for indigenous communities to realize the economic benefits by actually delivering on those housing needs.

I think of the conversations I had in Iqaluit when I was visiting MP Idlout in her community where we heard loud and clear that, despite the fact that there are significant investments going to Canada's north for housing as compared to years past, many of the economic benefits go to the companies that provide goods and services from the south. We have continuous learning opportunities. However, we have to take our lead from those who are most impacted. I'm looking forward, in the months and years ahead, to increasing the pace of delivery and the understanding of how the federal government can support indigenous communities in meeting the housing needs to bring to an end the housing crisis that they have been living through for far too many years.

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister Fraser.

With that, we'll go into the first round of questioning, starting with Mr. Schmale for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Ministers, for being here today.

Minister Fraser, you just mentioned your desire to keep doing more. However, this is the fourth Auditor General's report on indigenous housing, and there has been little to no improvement, according to the report.

Where are the homes you promised?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Since we've formed government, there are tens of thousands of homes that have been built or repaired through the programs that we've advanced. I would accept the recommendations of the Auditor General, which don't remain uniform as between reports. In fact, one of the reasons it's essential we maintain that position is so that we can have continued assessment of where we're at vis-à-vis where we need to be. The specific homes that you're asking about would depend on each community. There are members represented here who have homes in their communities

today that did not exist a number of years ago. We need to accelerate the pace of that delivery.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: According to the report here, 55,320 housing units need to be built between now and 2030 to keep on track. However, from 2018 to now, only 4,379 or 8% of the units have been completed. Thirteen per cent are in progress, and 79% are still needed.

Again, Minister, where are the homes?

Hon. Sean Fraser: As I mentioned, it will depend on which community you're talking about. We need to increase the pace of construction, and there's some irony in the question coming from a member whose party has a history of not making investments in housing in indigenous communities and who votes against the funding that comes towards this housing.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, according to the Auditor General, there has been little to no improvement in the last four Auditor General's reports. The last time I checked, you've been here for nine years, yet we are still dealing with the same problem.

Again, where are the homes?

Hon. Sean Fraser: With respect, over those nine years, every time there was an opportunity to support or vote for more investments in housing for indigenous communities, you have voted against them. It's ironic for you to sit here and pretend to be a champion for indigenous housing when your voting history has gone in the opposite direction at every opportunity.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, it still does not let you off the hook for the past nine years. Where are the homes?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There are tens of thousands of homes that have been added to housing supply in indigenous communities as a result of the investments that we've made. Do we need to do more? Yes, absolutely.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Little to nothing has changed. You keep saying you have to do more, and it seems the track record of this government is to spend money and use that as their talking point, but outcomes have not been changing, and that's the thing we should be actually focusing on.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I agree that we should be focusing on outcomes, but when I compare the outcome of tens of thousands of new homes existing with the 99 new homes that were built while your leader was the housing minister, it's clear that there is no contest. Moreover, it's not reasonable for a Conservative MP to show up at this committee and ask to do more on indigenous housing when you have voted against money for indigenous housing at every opportunity.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: You and your government have said that indigenous communities are the most important relationship. However, little to nothing has changed on the housing file. This is still substandard housing in many communities, and you're not even on track to meet the goals that you say you want to achieve. Again, what are you doing differently? You say you need to do more. Well, clearly nothing much has changed in the last nine years. What is the more?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The more is investing significant resources in homebuilding for indigenous communities and empowering indigenous communities to make decisions about how those investments are made. Both of those things were completely absent from the Conservative approach to housing when it came to indigenous people in this country. We have a sea change in approach and a dramatic increase in resources. We recently saw an increase in homebuilding, and we will continue to see more.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, there is no interpretation into French.

[English]

The Chair: Hold on.

You can continue with your time.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Minister, it was the Residential Construction Council of Ontario that said that there was no way the feds would meet their housing targets. Again, where are the homes you promised? Seventy-nine per cent of units are still needed.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, it's only been a few minutes, and we're already seen the Conservative member move off the issue of indigenous housing, much like they did when they had the opportunity to make investments and chose not to.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I figure you're not going to answer the question, so I might as well try another topic to try to get you to answer.

Chair, it's my time. Can I reclaim that time please, Chair?

The Chair: You have your time. You still have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you, Chair.

Maybe we'll focus on the actual question I just asked. The Residential Construction Council of Ontario said that there was no way the federal government would meet their housing target. Again, where are the homes?

• (1120)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I have two points in response. First of all, we've been at this committee for three minutes now, and the Conservatives have already changed the subject from indigenous housing, much as they avoided it while they were last in office—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Again, Chair—

Hon. Sean Fraser: —and he keeps interrupting to ruin the audio because he's embarrassed by the answer here, and he should be embarrassed.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: That's because you're not answering the question.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, do I have the floor? I want to respect the interpreters, but this is inappropriate.

The Chair: Order please. Can we think of the interpreters? When we have this type of cross-talk happening, the interpretation is not getting through. I'm listening to the French interpretation right now, and it's difficult when you have two people talking. Let's have one at a time if we can, please.

Mr. Schmale, your time is back to you.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much.

Again, rent has doubled. Housing costs have doubled. Food bank usage is at record highs. Minister, we're talking about housing that many of the people actually building housing say your government has no plan for and will not reach its target on. Again, it's a simple question, Minister. Where is the housing?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, now that I have the floor, I trust I can make this point without interruption.

This is a study about the housing needs of indigenous communities across this country. It has been a few minutes and the Conservatives are now resorting to reading questions off their phone, off-topic, because they feel like they can't have a serious conversation about this issue. There were years when they had that opportunity to make the investments and chose not to—

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time if he is just going to—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sorry, Mr. Chair, I'm being spoken over. Every time I make this argument he talks over me. Do I have the floor?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: If he's not going to answer the question, I'm not going to let him take my time, Chair.

The Chair: Yes, you have the floor.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, with respect to my friend and colleague, he had many years with his party in office to make investments or not make investments in indigenous housing. They chose not to. Now he has an opportunity to ask questions about it, and instead he's looking at his phone to ask questions he's reading from the leader's office, rather than actually engaging on the issue of housing in indigenous communities. It's inappropriate.

With respect, he says we have no plan, and again he's talking over me. He's very uncomfortable with this argument.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: I've asked him simple questions.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, do I have the floor?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: This is not answering my question. He doesn't get to run the clock out.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry. There's been no point of order. Do I have the floor?

The Chair: You do have the floor.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you. I respected my colleague while he was speaking.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Will I get that time back?

The Chair: You still have another [*Inaudible—Editor*].

Hon. Sean Fraser: I would appreciate it if he would return the professional courtesy.

He suggested that we don't have a plan. We literally published a plan in April of this year. He may think it's foreign, because the plan he put forward as a party has no measures in it that will actually build more homes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: So—

Hon. Sean Fraser: With respect, we have—

Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Mr. Shields.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you, Chair.

I would suggest that the member, Mr. Schmale, be able to ask his question. It's his time. The minister is going on and talking about other things.

Mr. Jamie Schmale: About nonsense.

Mr. Martin Shields: He needs to be able to reclaim his time to be able to speak and ask questions.

The Chair: Mr. Schmale, I'll give you one more question, okay?

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity.

Again, we are not seeing your targets met for non-first nations or indigenous communities and across the country. There have been no targets met. You're not on track anywhere in this country to meet your housing targets.

You say you have to do more. Fine. But the last four Auditor General reports have said that nothing has changed. I want to know, specifically, what is going to change.

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, with respect to the issue of targets, the targets outlined in the national housing strategy under our bilateral agreements and affordable housing investments have delivered more units than were set out as a goal at the outset. But we need to do more, as I've mentioned repeatedly. We have broadcast a series of measures in the recent housing plan that are going to increase the investments. The Conservatives seem to struggle with the idea that you should set a target that's going to solve a problem, not one that your measures are going to lead to anyway.

As a final comment, because I expect I'm going to run out of time, during the last exchange I should point out that when one of

the members said something about what I was talking about, the questioner said it was "nonsense".

Investment in housing for indigenous peoples in this country is not nonsense. It may appear that way, given the questions today and the history of the Conservative Party, but for the record, the government takes a different view.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Schmale.

With that, we will go to our second questioner in the first round.

Mr. McLeod, you have six minutes.

Mr. Michael McLeod (Northwest Territories, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ministers, thank you for joining us today. It's a very important topic for me and a very important topic for my constituents. In my previous life, I had the honour of being the housing minister for the Government of the Northwest Territories. I've been looking at the issue of housing for many years. I can tell you that for a long time we've been in a housing crisis.

Minister Fraser, you mentioned that we have a crisis on our hands. That crisis has been there for many years. During the time of the Conservative Party being in power, virtually zero dollars were coming for indigenous housing. Now we have two streams of funding coming to the Northwest Territories: Indigenous Services Canada money and CMHC money. We're still in a crisis, except we're in a crisis with a little bit of light shining through the tunnel. For the first time in our history, we have indigenous housing money coming to the Northwest Territories.

We also have CMHC programs that are being tapped into by our communities. From our smallest communities, such as Nahanni Butte, to our largest centre of Yellowknife, they're accessing the housing accelerator fund and putting up houses through the rapid housing program and homelessness investments. It's very good to see all that investment coming to the Northwest Territories, but of course we have to do more. I would really like to see the two streams of funding continue.

The Auditor General's report that we're talking about today doesn't cover housing in the Northwest Territories' indigenous communities. It only focuses on first nations south of 60. That is very disappointing to me, because information and statistics are very important when it comes to budgeting. I raised it with the Auditor General. I understand that the Auditor General will be reviewing housing in the Northwest Territories and will be looking at the territorial housing agency. It sounds like it will happen later on this year. I look forward to reading her office's findings.

My question to both you, as ministers, is this: Can you discuss how ISC and CMHC, respectively, are working directly with indigenous governments and organizations in the Northwest Territories to address the housing needs of their communities?

• (1125)

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Well, thank you very much, MP McLeod, and thanks for your ongoing advocacy for northern communities, especially in the Northwest Territories. You're right: The Auditor General's audit didn't look at first nations communities in Northwest Territories or the other territories because almost all of on-reserve first nations communities are located in the provinces, so I'm glad you had a chance to speak with her about how to get that data from northern communities, which are self-governing in many cases.

I think what we've learned, especially through emergency management, is that we need to work more closely with the territories. Quite frankly, the experience I had last summer supporting K'at'l'odecche—as you know, during the crisis they were experiencing resulting from the wildfire, and feeling really unheard, in many ways, by the territory at that particular time—informed us of the work we can do to support the territories in their obligation to meet the housing needs of self-governing people and to work with self-governing first nations to result in more housing.

The good news is that there was an announcement on January 18, 2024, that CMHC provided almost \$19 million more to support building 54 homes in indigenous communities in the Northwest Territories. You can see that this idea that we need to work more closely with self-governing first nations, and with first nations that are in territories, is starting to percolate throughout departments.

Maybe I can turn to Minister Fraser to talk about CMHC and that evolution.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Maybe before I answer I'll say thank you. Michael, it was you personally who opened my eyes to the dramatic need to increase investments, a few years ago, in advance of the budget 2022 decision to increase distinctions-based funding to the tune of \$4 billion. I think your being a champion for housing in the north has reached those of us who come from other parts of the country, and it's an example of your providing sincere value to the work we do in Ottawa.

Let me say that engagement directly with communities has to be a big part of the answer. Minister Hajdu mentioned a moment ago some of the investments CMHC made. We do that through the housing accelerator fund and with reaching deals directly with communities; through Reaching Home—51 projects just in the Northwest Territories—by leveraging resources like the rapid housing initiative to identify project proponents that have the capacity to deliver; and through our distinctions-based funding by engaging directly with rights holders and empowering them to make decisions about their own communities, but acting as a reliable partner when it comes to funding.

I see I'm out of time here, but I just want to reiterate my gratitude for the work that you do.

• (1130)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. McLeod.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lemire, you now have the floor for six minutes.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Before I start, can the interpreters confirm whether my microphone audio is good enough? I had a problem with my Internet connection, but I think it's fixed now.

The Chair: Yes, it's fine.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

For a change, I am speaking to you this morning from Montreal, where I am attending the 2024 annual Grand Economic Circle of Indigenous People and Quebec. It is funded in part by Indigenous Services Canada, but so far, I haven't seen any participants from the federal government.

Several basic points have been raised, including one that brought to mind the topic we're discussing this morning. One of the speakers emphasized the importance of reducing the gap between first nations and people in the rest of the country in terms of economic wealth. That gap is particularly acute when it comes to housing construction.

Mr. Fraser, what are you committed to doing to close the gap between wealthier indigenous communities and those that do not have the capacity to build as quickly as others?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for the question.

It is very important that indigenous communities and other communities be on an equal footing. There is no simple answer, but first of all, the situation could be improved by increasing investments in communities that do not have the necessary resources. That is why we're going to create funds to support those communities and give them the powers to make their own decisions.

[*English*]

It's not okay to have an "Ottawa knows best" attitude in many of these circumstances. Communities tend to know their needs, and we have to put resources on the table.

At the same time, this is a broader conversation, perhaps, about increasing resources and creating opportunities for success within communities by partnering not just on housing projects but also on other endeavours. For example, in my home province, a new opportunity to create an equity stake in green battery storage for Mi'kmaq communities is going to create additional financial resources.

It's a combination of setting the table for success and making the investments necessary to help play catch-up at the risk of dramatically oversimplifying a very complex challenge.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Could I add to that, Mr. Chair?

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: The reality—

Pardon me, Minister, I didn't mean to interrupt. Go ahead.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: It's not just a matter of additional funding. It is, as I think my colleague has said, about additional financing models.

[Translation]

Last week, we talked about projects like the Yānonhchia' initiative.

[English]

That leveraged the investments that first nations received through the federal government, and that actually changed the dynamic of the housing market on first nations.

I think there's way more we can do—leveraging investments to attract private capital and many other tools—that can accelerate this work.

Thank you for a very good question.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Minister Hajdu. You just anticipated one of the questions I was going to ask about the expertise that is being developed by and for indigenous people as part of the Yānonhchia' initiative.

I want to come back to housing construction. One of the things that is absolutely shocking, in my opinion, is the fact that the funding allows communities to build only two housing units a year. With the baby boom that these communities are experiencing, two housing units a year do not meet their needs. We will need to step outside the box.

There is another problem I would like to hear your comments on, Minister Fraser. What are you going to do about the standards that are required within indigenous communities? These communities do not have the same capacity to apply these standards as a traditionally white city, if I may use that expression, particularly a large city.

When it comes to indigenous funding, standards are required and time frames are very short. Often, within a two-year period, the architectural plans and specifications are required, as are the documents for the water system connections, and then construction has to start. These time frames are not realistic. As a result, grand an-

nouncements of billions of dollars are made when budgets are tabled, but in many cases, a large part of that money, around \$8 billion, goes back into government coffers, into the consolidated revenue fund. That money isn't being spent on indigenous people.

How do you pledge to resolve this situation in a lasting way?

• (1135)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for the question.

[English]

The first stage for me is to not exclusively have programs that are driven by decisions made in Ottawa.

One, putting the resources in the hands of communities that know their priorities is an essential ingredient if we're going to actually solve some of these problems.

Two, we need to continue increasing the resources that are going to solve the problem if we're going to achieve meaningful progress, but it's even more complicated than you've laid out in your question. Some of the nuances require us to understand that building housing in indigenous communities is different and more expensive, in many instances, than it can be in other communities.

Take Canada's north, for example, where you're dealing not only with challenging construction seasons but with a need to understand that a sea-lift here only allows you to deliver the supplies to build houses during certain portions of the year.

Engaging directly with communities and empowering them to make decisions about how those resources will be administered will deliver a far greater understanding of how to solve the problem efficiently than making decisions behind closed doors on Parliament Hill will.

Engaging with communities, increasing resources and trusting leaders to understand the needs of their communities are all essential ingredients to move forward and achieve progress.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Mr. Chair, if I might add to that, I just want to correct something. There was no money turned back to the Treasury Board from my department. Over the past three years, we've spent the entirety of our allocation and, in fact, have moved money very quickly to communities that can utilize that money if projects are delayed in other spaces.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lemire. Your time is up.

[English]

As the last questioner in the first round, Ms. Idlout, you have six minutes.

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

Thank you, Chair.

I will ask this very briefly. The Auditor General states that there was an increase in investments but they wrote that they “found that in 2023 80% of needs were still not [being] met”. We’ve known for decades now and over decades again I say that housing needs have been underinvested.

My question is for CMHC.

Knowing this, why did you choose to use 2001 data to make your allocations?

[English]

• (1140)

Ms. Nadine Leblanc (Interim Chief Financial Officer and Senior Vice-President, Policy, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation): The allocation was co-developed with the first nations during that time, near 2001, and considered many factors, including Stats Canada’s census, but it also included suitability, overcrowding and specific regional needs.

As presented by the Auditor General, CMHC is committed to review this allocation and to work with first nations to co-develop the new formula, which will include the new census data, as well as other factors that first nations deem important in prioritizing their housing needs. That will be a priority of CMHC.

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

Since 2001, that’s quite a while ago. Why is it that you have not updated the stats and the information to more current dates?

[English]

Ms. Nadine Leblanc: We work with first nations across the country to understand the needs of first nations across regional and—

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

I’m interrupting you because you’re not responding to my question. I will go on to the next one.

I will ask Minister Hajdu.

The Auditor General also quoted that “unless the departments and corporations take meaningful action to address the issues”, we will continue to have problems, and “it is unclear if the” activities “will be successful”.

Please produce an updated clarification on how this might happen soon.

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: First of all, I’d like to say that although obviously there needs to continue to be ambition in the investment and in the way of the investment—and I think Minister Fraser is exactly right—through a self-determined lens, through additional tools—

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. I’m sorry to interrupt the discussion again, but there’s no interpretation into French.

[English]

The Chair: Let’s just pause for one second here.

Please continue.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, MP Idlout, for the question.

I will just say that I think your question points to two important things. One is that the ambition of investment can’t slow down and that we all have to continue in each of our respective files and ways to ensure that the priority of indigenous housing doesn’t fall to the background noise that I think we can see and hear from MP Schmale’s line of questioning. This is a priority for this government and it’s a priority for the country because, as MP Idlout and many others know, if people don’t have access to good housing, it’s very difficult for them to reach their full potential.

There is some positive progress. I will say that the Government of Canada in partnership with first nations conducts something called the well-being survey. In 2016, first nations reported an average community well-being score of 58 and, by 2021, that average rose to 62. In terms of housing, first nations reported an average community well-being housing score of 68 in 2016, and that rate rose to 73. In 2016, there were 17 first nations that reported community well-being housing scores of less than 40, and by 2021 we only saw two under that amount.

This is important progress, and I think we need to guard it and continue.

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

I apologize. I asked you—

[English]

• (1145)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Idlout. I’m afraid that the time has elapsed here.

That concludes the first round of questioning. We’re moving on to the second round now, and I have Mr. Zimmer for five minutes.

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

Thank you, Ministers.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, I’m sorry to interrupt the discussion, but there’s no interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: Let’s pause for a second here.

Mr. Zimmer, please go ahead.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: My questions will be for Minister Fraser.

I was in Iqaluit just a few months ago. I met Kevin and his wife, Malaya. Kevin used to be a truck driver at a Nunavut mine but is now out of a job due to the mine closing. He wanted a better life for his family, so he moved away from the rougher part of town where drugs and alcohol were prevalent. They moved into a small government-funded house with their daughter and three young grandsons in 2011. Kevin and Malaya showed me that there is mould in every corner. The bathroom plumbing is backed up and has been broken for the last few years. He has had to cover every window with plastic to stop the frigid drafts and keep his family warm. In one case, there's a kitchen window, and if he didn't keep it closed, his grandchildren could fall 15 feet down and be severely harmed as a result. The siding is falling off. The floors are falling apart. Malaya has bad asthma and is often triggered by the ever-present mould.

Minister, would you call this a success or a failure?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Anytime you're dealing with living conditions like you've just described, I think it's a signal that a greater level of investment needs to follow.

Now, to be clear—

Mr. Chair, do I have the floor for roughly the same amount of time as the questioner?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's whether it was a success or a failure—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, do I have the floor, and do I have as much time as the questioner?

The Chair: Mr. Zimmer, allow the minister to answer your question, please.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I want to be careful in dealing with issues that are managed by indigenous or territorial partners without having had the chance to discuss the specific issues with those who manage the program. I hope that you don't label their work as a failure. I hope that you would not necessarily attribute that to them like the way you've put it in your question.

I think any time you see that quality of housing, it demands greater investment. We'll continue to increase the resources for our partners who manage these issues, including, presumably, the project that you're referring to.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Minister, the question was for you. I'm not asking you to answer questions based on the other housing authorities that are in Nunavut. I'm asking because the federal government has a responsibility around housing, and I asked you a simple question as to whether it was a success or a failure. It clearly is a failure.

I'll move on to my second question.

Minister, you have been in government for nine years, almost a decade. Are you familiar with the 2023 “Northern Housing Report”?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: According to the report, 80% of families in Nunavut can't afford to buy a house, and 51% of families can't even afford to rent a place to live. “The average price of a single-detached home reached a historical high of \$724,504”, which was an increase of almost 20% over the previous year. As of April this year, only 55% of residents have a job. Construction is down. Resi-

dential construction is down, and non-residential construction is down.

The simple truth is the houses are not getting built, and you know that, Minister. This is from a minister who's promising four million houses across the country. There's a need for at least 3,000 more houses in Nunavut. It's not getting done.

Minister, I'll get back to it because my time is short. Would you call your housing record in Nunavut a success or a failure?

• (1150)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I'm just confirming that I have time to answer this question given the length of the question that was put to me.

I always ask myself the motivation behind certain questions.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, do I have the floor? I'm interrupted every time I raise the Conservatives' record on indigenous housing.

The Chair: There's a point of order that's been raised.

Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: When we come here as opposition to question the minister.... They've been here for nine years, and houses are not getting built—

Mr. Jaime Battiste (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): That's not a point of order.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I'm getting to it.

We're then questioned about the time and length of our question, when I'm talking about a story about Kevin and Malaya, people who are living in squalor because of this minister's inaction.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: If that's taking too much time, I apologize, but this minister needs to answer the questions we are asking of him.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have no problem with the time of the question.

The Chair: I don't believe that's a point of order.

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's not a point of order; I agree with you.

Moreover, I have no problem with the length of the question. I actually wish the previous questioner spent as much time on indigenous housing.

What I have problems with is the Conservatives trying to shut down an answer that may be uncomfortable for them, because what I hear behind that question, coming from a member who opposes the very investments that are designed to address the needs he's raising in his question, when I know that he stands and votes against those measures—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I'll claim back my time.

Hon. Sean Fraser: —I ask myself if he is trying to score a point or solve a problem.

It's clear his interest is to score a political point, because when the Conservatives had an opportunity to make investments to build housing in indigenous communities, they chose not to. When they have an opportunity to vote for or against investments, they vote against.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: It's my time, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I will take with a grain of salt the continued interruptions because this is uncomfortable given the historic record of Conservatives withdrawing investments—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: On a point of order, can I have my time back?

Hon. Sean Fraser: —when it comes to housing in indigenous communities.

Question away. Take as much time as you would like, but let's engage in a real conversation rather than cheap shots for Facebook.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Chair, I'd claim my time back for the last minute because he's just been running off on an answer talking about a previous Conservative government.

The questions are for the government that's been in power for 10 years. His responsibility as minister is to answer my question, and you're not recognizing that I'm trying to claim back my time, Mr. Chair. It's our time. It's not the minister's.

The Chair: Okay. I understand that, and you still have a minute and a half.

An hon. member: I have a point of order.

The Chair: That's not a point of order.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Is it my time?

The Chair: Yes, continue.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): How else is he going to get his time back?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Do I have my time?

The Chair: The clock is running.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Minister, you haven't answered my question twice now. I've asked whether the previous two examples have been a success or a failure. You deliberately aren't answering that as a success or failure. You're saying that you're just going to throw more money at it or make bigger promises. Your government can't even plant two billion trees, and yet you're going to promise to build four million houses.

I will read parts of an article on the housing units promised in Taloyoak, Nunavut, including two fiveplexes that still haven't been built because they're coming in at an extremely high cost of \$1.1 million per unit:

“They were just all way too expensive,” Kusugak said. “The housing corporation just doesn't have that type of money.”

This isn't the first time in recent years the Nunavut government has cancelled projects due to the rising costs.

Guess why?

Canada's rising inflation rate, high fuel prices and supply chain delays have affected construction in the territory....

Minister, you're going to say, “It's not my responsibility, not my fault.” You've been in government for almost a decade. It's all your fault.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, I didn't hear a question at the end of that. However, I would point out that we're dealing with—

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Okay, I'll ask it: Has this been a—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair, do I have the floor?

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I'll ask the question.

Hon. Sean Fraser: [*Inaudible—Editor*] take my direction from you.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Has housing been a success or a failure, Minister?

The Chair: Order, please, Mr. Zimmer.

You have 10 seconds for a short answer, Minister Fraser. Then we have to move on.

Hon. Sean Fraser: We have built more than 22,000 homes in indigenous communities through the programs we've introduced since 2015. The Conservative government had a \$300-million fund that had 99. I will not take lessons on delivery when it comes to housing in indigenous communities from someone who votes against every one of the policies that would support it when he's clearly motivated by his political interest rather than trying to help vulnerable communities.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Your time has elapsed.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead on your point of order, Mr. Zimmer.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Yes. He asked me a question and I still had 10 seconds left.

The question was whether you were a success or a failure. You clearly have been a failure.

Thank you.

• (1155)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zimmer.

Next we have Mr. Carr for five minutes.

Mr. Ben Carr (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Minister Hajdu, but I certainly offer the opportunity to Minister Fraser to weigh in as well.

Ministers, we heard a number of weeks ago that part of what has posed an obstacle and an ongoing challenge for housing in the north is the impacts of climate change. Having sat on the agriculture committee over the course of the past number of months, we know that this is posing significant challenges to farmers and producers across the country. It manifests, of course, in all sorts of different ways, whether that's in the agricultural industry, whether that's in the transportation industry or whether that's people just trying to participate in leisure activities with their kids outdoors.

It clearly has also had an impact on housing costs and the conditions of housing in the north. In northern Manitoba, for example, where we're seeing recession in terms of permafrost, that's posing significant challenges with things like our rail line in Churchill and other pieces of infrastructure.

Minister Hajdu, can you comment, please, on the ways in which you and your department have seen the impacts of climate change impact first nations housing specifically?

Minister Fraser, if you want to talk about housing more generally in relation to climate change, I'd certainly welcome those comments as well.

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much for a real question about a real challenge facing not just indigenous communities but communities across Canada with the advent of a warming climate and increasingly climate-related disasters. In fact, many of the visits when I've had the pleasure of meeting with first nations have been to communities that are working to rebuild homes and other infrastructure after a devastating climate-related incident. On the east coast they had torrential flooding. I know that MP Battiste would know all about the kinds of impacts that flooding is having on first nations communities, in particular around housing but other infrastructure as well. I mentioned Lytton First Nation and Skwllax nearby, which suffered tremendous infrastructure loss.

This is not only creating instability for first nations communities, it's also destroying functional infrastructure that costs, in some cases, millions of dollars to replace. Obviously, the more remote a community is, the harder it is to build. It's something that I think is really absent from the consideration of the questions I've been hearing from the official opposition. Getting equipment and people and infrastructure supplies to remote communities that are often not road accessible is an additional cost that has to be borne.

I will also say that it delays communities that oftentimes have a variety of things under way—economic development, projects of their own, infrastructure plans for investing in building up their communities—and when a climate-related disaster strikes, all of that is put on pause while the community responds to that crisis and evacuates its residents, sometimes for months and months, if not longer.

Lastly, I will say that some communities, such as Peguis First Nation, due to the historical location of their community—you would know this very well, MP Carr, and you've been an advocate for communities in Manitoba—will see repeated flooding. That re-

ally undermines the progress they have been able to regain inch by inch after significant flooding events.

Mr. Ben Carr: Mr. Fraser, did you want to add to that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm happy to supplement the answer.

We see unique climate impacts in indigenous communities and northern communities that disproportionately impact indigenous peoples across Canada. Some of them can be building resilient housing that can withstand severe weather events. Others will require us to make better planning decisions and share information around where we're expecting more severe weather, such as floods. In my hometown, hurricanes had a unique impact, not only on Mr. Battiste's community in Cape Breton but also Pictou Landing and Paq'tnkek First Nation in northern Nova Scotia.

We also see important unique factors to consider when it comes to housing in the north. The changing nature of permafrost on building practices, needing to build to a different code given the cold climate and the necessary infrastructure that can impact the ability and time at which you can ship or transport the necessary materials to build all feed into it. That's in addition to understanding the different nature of what it takes to build a home when it you consider the different impacts of not only climate change but also the traditional climate.

This has to be front and centre in all our conversations. It's not good enough to build a house that will last the next few months. We have to build a housing ecosystem that will last a generation.

● (1200)

Mr. Ben Carr: Thanks very much, Ministers, I appreciate the commentary on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Carr.

We're moving on to our third questioner in the second round.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, you have two and a half minutes.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, as I mentioned earlier, we have to make sure that first nations have the expertise within their communities to carry out projects, and that is a major problem. How do you ensure that you have architects and engineers who can design buildings in the communities?

There is also the issue of insurance. I recently met with representatives of the FNFA, the First Nations Finance Authority, who told me that there's a major problem when it comes to insuring loans. The traditional ways of assessing whether a project is risky or not do not apply to indigenous communities. We know that the FNFA has developed expertise that is recognized in the insurance industry.

Finally, there are a number of initiatives to raise capital. The Yänonhchia' initiative is a good example. It relies on the Aboriginal Savings Corporation of Canada to establish financial credibility.

Minister Hajdu, over the coming years, how will you support these initiatives that develop the indigenous know-how used by and for indigenous projects?

Hon. Patty Hajdu: Thank you very much, Mr. Lemire. That's a great question.

We have a new program to improve the capacity of first nations.

[English]

It's called the housing management subsidy. It was announced in budget 2022, and it includes \$157 million to support the training of the kinds of experts that you're talking about—housing managers on reserve—who can help with the very issue of protecting the property, making sure the property is maintained and making sure that those assessments are up to date to address some of the issues you've identified, like insurance.

We also received \$66 million over three years to devote to training and certification, and the provisions of technical services for those first nations housing managers.

I will also say that you mentioned using a partnership between government and private capital to accelerate building houses. Let me give you an example of some work that CMHC did that was announced on April 18, 2023. CMHC partnered with the indigenous-owned private credit fund, Keewaywin Capital Inc., on a pilot project to build over 330 homes financed by private capital. This demonstrates how private credit can work as a viable low-risk way to augment the investments that the federal government is making.

I think you're on the right track with the questions you're asking. That's exactly the direction that this government wants to go...those tools of self-determination, including the skills, the knowledge and the partnerships that often can be formed once that capacity continues to grow.

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you. *Meegwetch.*

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lemire.

The last questioner is Ms. Idlout.

[English]

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

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

Thank you, Chair.

First of all, I'd like to remind everyone, it is my understanding that the Auditor General's report is to look at indigenous housing. It

doesn't mean Inuit. It has no Inuit content, nor does it cover any Nunavut housing or Inuit housing needs. I know that.

Minister Hajdu, I understand that we are not involved with Nunavut on this issue, but I also represent Nunavut Inuit, and we talk about indigenous people. We talk about first nations and Métis.

The Auditor General—

[Translation]

• (1205)

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry to have to raise a point of order, but I'm not getting the French interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Idlout, we'll pause for a second just to make sure the interpretation is working.

Ms. Idlout, it's working. You can continue.

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

I ask you now, Minister Hajdu, on May 27 you responded that the Auditor General would be meeting with you.

[Translation]

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Pardon me, Mr. Chair, but there's no interpretation into French.

[English]

The Chair: I'll pause one more minute.

Okay, Ms. Idlout, you may continue.

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

I'm not asking questions; I am making a statement that you stated the mandate of the government and that you did not agree with the Auditor General on first nations homes and housing. Why did you not agree with the indigenous first nations people?

[Translation]

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I sincerely apologize, Mr. Chair, but I hear Ms. Idlout speaking in Inuktitut. There's still no interpretation into French.

[English]

The Chair: Let's pause for one second.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, I think there's a problem with your connection, because we can hear the interpretation into French here, in the meeting room.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, but I'm connected to the House channel and I selected French interpretation. There may be a technical problem, but it's not my Internet connection, since I'm using an official House device. I can hear Ms. Idlout very clearly, but I can't hear the French interpretation.

The Chair: The problem may be with Zoom, then. We're going to fix it.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead one more time, Ms. Idlout. You still have about 30 seconds.

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

Why did you not agree with the Auditor General's report? There were some things you questioned. Can I understand why you did not agree with some of the reports?

[English]

Hon. Patty Hajdu: First of all, I think in general we agreed with the majority of the Auditor General's reports, and I think that the focus on the gap for Inuit-specific housing is an area where we have recognized a gap in the Auditor General's report, although she specifically indicated that it was not included for the reason that she said in the report.

That's why we supported a study with ITK on the housing gap that was Inuit specific. In addition, we have seen budgeted amounts in 2018, 2022 and 2024 through Crown-Indigenous Relations, which is dispensing that money in partnership with Inuit to close the housing gap in the north. That amount is about \$500 million with an additional allotment in 2024.

We will continue to focus on Inuit-specific solutions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister Hajdu.

I'm afraid we're going to have to end it at that point.

I do want to thank Minister Hajdu and Minister Fraser.

Ms. Lori Idlout: I have a point of order.

The Chair: I will excuse the witnesses while we suspend very quickly.

Okay, you have a point of order.

Ms. Lori Idlout: I thought I explained explicitly that I understood that we're studying first nations housing, the Auditor General's report on housing for first nations. I explicitly explained that I know that this is not related to Inuit, Inuit lands or housing for Nunavut.

I was asking for an explanation as to why they disagree with the Auditor General's report and to explain, to clarify, in what areas they disagree.

Can I have the permission of the committee to have a written response?

• (1210)

The Chair: Yes, absolutely, Ms. Idlout.

With that, we're going to suspend shortly as our next panel is getting set up here. We'll return in a couple of minutes.

Mr. Lemire, I saw that you had your hand up as well. Is this about translation?

[Translation]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Yes, I didn't want to interrupt the conversation again, but I only got interpretation at the end, with the minister's response as well.

Thank you very much to the interpreters. I appreciate their work, and I'm sorry for the inconvenience.

• (1210)

(Pause)

• (1215)

[English]

The Chair: I'd like to call this meeting back to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Wednesday, April 10, the committee is meeting to continue its study of "Report 3: First Nations and Inuit Policing Program", of the 2024 reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

I would like to welcome our witness, the Honourable Dominic LeBlanc, Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs, who is flanked by officials Shawn Tupper and Chris Moran from the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness.

Also, we have Deputy Commissioner Bryan Larkin and Assistant Commissioner Warren Brown from the RCMP.

With that, Minister LeBlanc, I will pass the floor to you for five minutes for your opening.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Minister of Public Safety, Democratic Institutions and Intergovernmental Affairs): Mr. Chair and colleagues, thank you for inviting me and thank you for introducing my colleagues from the department and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, who have joined me.

Mr. Chair, just by way of an opening, I know you invited me for an hour and I'm happy to be here for an hour. I was here on time, but you were running a bit late. As I mentioned to some of you, I am seeing the national chief of indigenous policing on this very issue in my office in the Confederation Building at 1:15, so you'll understand that at 1:05 or 1:10 I will excuse myself, so as to not keep her waiting.

Colleagues, it is significant that today is the fifth anniversary—I just wanted to note, in the sombre moment that it is—of the release of the report on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls. It struck me when I was preparing for this conversation on the weekend that we would be here on this very day.

[*Translation*]

I appreciate the opportunity to speak about the Auditor General of Canada's performance audit report on the first nations and Inuit policing program, or FNIPP, and I thank Auditor General Karen Hogan and her team for the report and their work. I had quite a productive discussion with her, by the way.

As you know, the FNIPP is an important program that aims to increase access to dedicated, culturally responsive policing services in first nations and Inuit communities, consistent with provincial and territorial jurisdiction over administration of justice, including policing operations.

The Government of Canada welcomes the Auditor General's recommendations. These come at a fitting time, as Public Safety Canada is currently exploring ways to modernize its programming for indigenous people. The report will help guide the department, and partners like the RCMP, as it looks to improve the delivery and impact of the FNIPP, including through measurable results, in the communities it serves.

[*English*]

Our efforts to act on the report's recommendations are already under way. That's what I was able to assure the Auditor General in my constructive conversation with her.

For instance, Public Safety Canada has recently updated its internal structure to streamline the delivery of the program related to indigenous issues, programs and policy work within our department's mandate.

The Government of Canada has also committed to tabling legislation that recognizes first nations police services as essential services, as soon as is feasible, and we're well on our way to making this happen. That is the subject of a conversation that I have had with the national chief and other partners, but I'm going to continue that conversation, as I said, a little later this afternoon as well. In fact, over this past winter indigenous-led regional and national engagement sessions have been held on proposed legislative options to co-develop federal legislation to recognize first nations police services as essential services.

This engagement builds on the ongoing collaboration that our department has fostered with first nations and subject matter experts, obviously, like the First Nations Chiefs of Police Association and the First Nations Police Governance Council, as well as, of course, provincial and territorial partners.

Public Safety has also revisited the program management relationship with the RCMP to more readily consider and integrate officer availability in program management decisions, which was the subject of some of the Auditor General's fair comments.

• (1220)

The RCMP is continuing to work with communities to improve cultural awareness and practices as they reaffirm their commitment to keeping indigenous communities safe, including through the first nations and Inuit policing program. I have had reassuring and constructive conversations with Commissioner Mike Duheme and I have a lot of confidence in the leadership of Assistant Commissioner Brown and Deputy Commissioner Larkin, who are with me today.

[*Translation*]

In conclusion, the Government of Canada will continue to work closely with first nations and Inuit partners, law enforcement agencies, and provinces and territories.

The provinces and territories make the decisions on the level of policing needs in their jurisdiction, identify priorities for this program and provide 48% of the costs. As you well know, the federal government then cost-matches the remaining 52%.

In advancing this work, it is important that we respect the constitutional division of power. It is a challenge in this context, but in my opinion, the challenge is not insurmountable.

[*English*]

We look forward to continuing to work with indigenous communities that rely on these services. It is their security and their safety that should guide all these efforts.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

With that, we will go into our first round of questioning starting with Mr. Melillo, for six minutes.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

I guess we will start with an easy one right off the hop to get into this, Minister. Just a simple yes or no, do you believe that first nations policing is essential?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Yes. I do.

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate the answer, Minister. That's not something we get very often around here.

You say that you believe policing on first nations is essential. You mentioned in your opening comments that the government is committed to tabling legislation. Unfortunately, this is something we have heard for a number of years now.

Your predecessor who was rightly removed from his position at the time in 2022 said that he was going to work around the clock to get this done. He said that it was right around the corner, that this legislation would be here, and since then we have seen delays. The government at one point began blaming the AFN for dragging its feet, which was a ridiculous assertion in an attempt to deflect from your government, but now you are the minister and the buck stops with you.

Why should Canadians and first nations across the country believe you this time?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: They should believe us because there has been a considerable body of work done in this respect. I refer to consultations that Assistant Deputy Minister Moran has had and her colleagues have had across the country. These are ongoing conversations. As I said, I'm picking up the conversation with the national chief later this afternoon.

I don't underestimate the complexity of this initiative. I participated in a federal-provincial-territorial meeting in Bromont, Quebec, with provincial and territorial ministers. They, obviously, have different views as to how this legislation might apply.

As I noted, it's a constitutional jurisdiction they have, but that doesn't mean that we don't have an obligation to get it right. I know the suspense has been terrible for you, but I think you should look forward to seeing legislation, I hope, in an appropriate moment.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you, Minister. Again, I appreciate that. I want to stress again the urgency, because this was 2022. It's been two years that your government has been dragging its feet. Since the commitment, of course, you've had nine years in government, with ample opportunity to move this forward.

I had an opportunity to speak with your deputy minister at a previous committee about this process. He mentioned that, "It is simply the struggle of co-developing legislation".

Minister, why is developing legislation in consultation with first nations a struggle for your department?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I don't think working in a sensitive and appropriate way with first nations partners is anything other than the appropriate way that we should be doing this work. My experience with the department is exactly how they're approaching this work. As I say, I have a lot of confidence—

Mr. Eric Melillo: Do you disagree with Mr. Tupper, your deputy minister? Do you disagree with his characterization that this is a struggle, or do you agree with it?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I would never seek to disagree with a deputy minister as senior and as experienced as Shawn Tupper—

Mr. Eric Melillo: So you do believe that it is a struggle for your department to work and collaborate with first nations.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: No. That's the word you're using. I said it's an—

Mr. Eric Melillo: That's the word your deputy minister used on the record in committee.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: If you want to ask the deputy minister a question, you can. What I'm happy to tell you is that it's work that we're committed to doing. The deputy minister and our officials in the department are doing I think very constructive and positive work. He and I and Chris and others are going to meet the national chief to continue this work in a little less than an hour from now.

• (1225)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Okay. Thank you, Minister.

I'd like to move into some details of the report that you're here to discuss. Of course, a lot is concerning. For me in northwestern On-

tario, a Treaty 3 territory captures most of my riding. What's concerning in our local context is that Treaty 3, as well as two other police services in Ontario, have had to take the government to court. They are fighting for equal recognition.

All of this is happening—such an important, essential service as policing is—and we see that your department anticipates that over \$45 million in program funds will be left undisbursed at the end of this fiscal year. Why?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Chair, our colleague has asked a number of questions—

Mr. Eric Melillo: Just one question.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Well, there was a long preamble where you referenced some of the northern Ontario work. In fact, some of the police leadership that has most inspired me has been from northern Ontario. I have learned a great deal from some of the police leaders in your part of our country. I think we should acknowledge that this is a part of the country that has seen considerable success. We need to find a way to support them.

With respect to the lapsing of money—

Mr. Eric Melillo: I appreciate that, Minister. I appreciate that. But—

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I was about to answer your question on the lapsing of money.

Mr. Eric Melillo: —your department has \$45 million on the table. Why are you not spending this money?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: When I read the Auditor General's report, that was a source of concern to me. I discussed it with the senior RCMP leadership in the department right away. One of the challenges is that this program is a cost-shared program. Our contribution comes at the end of the process, once provinces or territories allocate their own money.

In some cases, as I referred to in my opening comments, it has to do with the RCMP's ability to staff a particular position in a particular community. If that particular position is not able to be staffed, that's a separate challenge that we're making considerable progress in addressing. I hope somebody asks us about recruitment and retention for some of these positions in indigenous communities, because there's a good story to tell there.

But you can see the challenge. The department is not able to allocate money to a particular position that is not filled, and nor under a contribution agreement are we able to allocate money if a partner hasn't matched the 48%. There should be zero money lapsed. The way to get to zero money lapsed—we should increase the funding, which we're prepared to do—is to work with provincial and territorial partners and the RCMP to improve the way they recruit and retain, which is well under way.

I'm confident that the number should be diminishing rapidly, but we do need to work with our policing partners in different jurisdictions to get that number to zero. I don't want to pretend that we alone have the ability to drive that number to zero, but we will work with them to get it to zero as quickly as we can.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Melillo.

Our second questioner in the first round of the second panel is Mr. Powlowski for six minutes.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Thank you.

We've heard you talk, Minister, about developing and co-developing legislation to make first nations policing an essential service, but we haven't really heard about the significance of that. What is the significance? What does that mean, practically speaking, for providing good-quality policing in indigenous communities?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: As Dr. Powlowski noted, the designation of first nations' policing as an essential service confirms, I think, something that non-indigenous communities have known for a very long time. It's that the ability to rely on professional, accessible, independent policing services is an essential requirement for communities to be safe, for communities to be able to grow and for families to be able to work and live in communities. It should be no less so in indigenous communities.

I learned something from representatives of policing services in northern Ontario, which is so ably represented by Dr. Powlowski.

Imagine if you worked for the Toronto Police Service—or heaven forbid, the RCMP, Bryan Larkin—and you didn't know if you would have a paycheque on April 1 because it's a contribution agreement based on a certain number of fiscal years.

How do you train, recruit and maintain public confidence and the confidence of the officers who serve in these police forces if there isn't long-term, reliable and recurring funding?

The idea is to designate it as an essential service and provide legislative certainty as to the long-term, recurring nature of the funding. It will—I learned this from police chiefs from northern Ontario—be a lot easier for them to recruit and retain the kind of professional officers that they want to serve in their communities. It speaks to the leadership in those communities being able to count on what is in every other community an essential service, as I said.

The idea that it sunsets with a contribution agreement wouldn't make sense in a non-indigenous community. We think it's a long overdue thing that we can correct. We hope we can correct it legislatively.

• (1230)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Thank you.

Maybe you partly answered this question with that response.

I certainly know that they have trouble recruiting people to work in indigenous communities. Having spoken to one police chief recently, it seems this is a common problem across Canada, within both indigenous communities and non-indigenous communities.

What are we doing to try to recruit more people into policing in general, but more particularly to work in indigenous communities?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: It's a subject of conversation I've had with the leadership of the RCMP since I became the public safety minister.

Assistant Commissioner Brown is in a great position to answer that based on his work. If it's okay, he might be able to give some more specific answers.

Assistant Commissioner Warren Brown (Indigenous and Support Services, Royal Canadian Mounted Police): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The RCMP, along with other police organizations nationally, right now are having a very challenging time recruiting anybody, period.

With that, in 2023, we started a very robust recruiting program. We launched a first nations, Inuit and Métis recruiting strategy specific to those designations to help increase the number of applicants and increase candidate retention. The key objectives of this strategy include targeted marketing and outreach, reduction of barriers for applicants and the provision of support for applicants.

Our goal is to reach 10% indigenous cadets at Depot by the year 2027. For the first time since the pandemic, we are up to 40 troops. We have a goal of getting to 50 troops, with the full 32 allotment within those troops.

I attended Depot last week. It was the 30th anniversary of the indigenous pre-cadet training program, IPTP. We had a full troop with that. Many of these young adults want to work not only in their home communities, but in other indigenous communities.

We have our second IPTP troop starting in August. I think we're on a really good pathway as it is right now.

Overall, the RCMP has about 2,500 vacancies. That's about a 15% vacancy pattern across the board for frontline policing.

In our indigenous communities, however, out of 1,823 indigenous employees, we have about a 7% vacancy. Again, I don't say that's good, but I think we're making some pretty good headway.

I'm really optimistic that in years to come, we'll have a really good-news story for you.

Thank you.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Is there any consideration of recruiting specifically from the rangers program? We've spoken to a number of rangers. It's certainly a group that impressed me and seemed to be a potentially good pool for policing services.

A/Commr Warren Brown: It's funny you should ask that question. The brother of one of the IPTP cadets attended his graduation, and he was a graduate of that program, so he and I had a discussion. I think, along with other initiatives we have locally in communities, including our indigenous communities, that is well under way.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Powlowski.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for six minutes.

• (1235)

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for your presentation.

I was pleased to hear the Conservatives' question, but the window is closing fast and the bill is slow in coming. If the government were to change, wouldn't you feel that all the work you've done has been in vain? Aren't you afraid of running out of time, given the impending end of the current Parliament?

I'm curious to hear your comments on that.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Lemire, thank you for your question.

You won't be surprised to hear me say that I don't share the pessimistic view that we're on the verge of a change in government. I do not want that, as it would be a setback in terms of support for indigenous peoples, and not just when it comes to issues related to the administration of justice. However, I understand your sentiment. I'm teasing you, of course, but I would have rather talked about parliamentary timelines and the general election, which would take place in 12 or 15 months, after Parliament is dissolved.

Having said that, I am fully aware of the timeline. That is underpinning my current conversation with the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations. I also understand the objective of wanting a bill that clearly defines the essential nature and the recurrence of funding, as I said.

That said, your political party is very interested in matters of provincial jurisdiction. I will not hide the fact that it is quite a challenge to find the right way for the Parliament of Canada to legislate in this matter while taking into account the provincial justice systems and police services. I am still very optimistic following my conversations with my counterpart Mr. Bonnardel, who wants to be a partner. The Sûreté du Québec, which is showing a lot of good will, is also an important partner for us in this regard. I just need to find a way of doing things that meets the essential and important objective, but that doesn't put us in a position where we could be criticized in court for trying to legislate in an area of provincial jurisdiction.

I'm not saying this to provoke you. I admit that, in other cases, you may tell us that we are not sensitive enough, but—

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. LeBlanc, I'll be honest with you. From what I hear on the ground, there are indeed a lot of discussions between the federal and provincial governments about the establishment of these indigenous police forces. The problem is that not enough discussions are being held with the indigenous communities themselves, especially at the federal level. First nations are thirsty for information on what's happening with the bill and on other issues.

We know that the calls for justice for missing and murdered indigenous women and girls have been numerous. There are calls for a transformation of policing and the development of legislation in collaboration with indigenous police forces. That element is critical. Minister Hajdu had moved in that direction, but the central question remains: When will the bill be introduced to provide for these fundamental changes so that indigenous police services in communities would be recognized as essential, and funded accordingly?

That has an impact, especially in my region, where discussions are under way to create a regional indigenous police force for all of Abitibi-Témiscamingue. This is an emergency, in particular for the Long Point community in Winneway, which no longer has its own police service.

When will we be able to take action?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you for the question.

I have had the same encouraging information about the willingness to train this regional indigenous police force in your Abitibi-Témiscamingue region. That is precisely what we would like to see legislated.

Your Conservative colleague quoted my predecessor, who may have given too specific of a deadline. Not surprisingly, we missed that deadline. I will be careful, but I can tell you that I understand the urgency. I am aware of the issue of parliamentary timelines, which you rightly raised. I hope to have some encouraging results from my conversation today with the national chief. I will continue this work until we get there, but I understand the urgency, as do my colleagues here with me today.

• (1240)

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: I would invite you to put your political weight behind it, Mr. LeBlanc; we know that this weight is considerable.

The government must prioritize indigenous issues. All too often, bills dealing with indigenous issues, such as Bill C-61, Bill C-38 and many others, are not prioritized by the government in the legislative agenda. If we want to go all the way, we will have to prioritize them.

Thank you very much. That's all my time.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Thank you for your comment, Mr. Lemire.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lemire.

[English]

Next up we have Ms. Idlout for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Chair.

I would like to thank all of you. You will be leaving soon, and you didn't have much time, so thanks for warning us.

According to the Auditor General's report, only 38% of the communities in this program had a dedicated officer on-site. The terms of the program require 100% capacity. Why is the RCMP not meeting its obligations?

[*English*]

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I have a point of order.

Mr. Chair, we're not getting translation from Inuktitut.

The Chair: Mr. Powlowski, just so you know, you will need a headset to speak.

We'll just pause for a quick second to make sure that the translation is coming through.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Mr. Chair, in response to the interpreter on the French channel, the interpretation is working very well.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Idlout, it seems to be working. You can continue.

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

According to the Auditor General's report, only 38% of the communities are participating in this program. Only 38% of the communities had a dedicated officer on-site. The term of the program requires 100% capacity. Why is the RCMP not meeting its obligations?

[*English*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That was also one of the things I spoke to the Auditor General about, and when I read the report, it was obviously a source of concern as it would be for you and the people who you and other colleagues represent.

Again, in order to provide reliable, precise information, because I understand the importance for the communities, perhaps Assistant Commissioner Brown could provide some precision.

The good news is that there are 443 positions contemplated in this agreement. At the time of the audit, there were 60 vacancies. That number has been cut in half. It's down to 30. It should be zero, and we're working to get there.

Perhaps Assistant Commissioner Brown could provide some specific answers to the precise communities that you're referring to where there were vacancies.

A/Commr Warren Brown: This is a very complex matter whereby the provinces and the territories are responsible for the administration of the police. I noted in the Auditor General's report that this is clearly work that the RCMP needs to improve upon, and we intend to do that with our counterparts at Public Safety Canada.

We're not a signatory to the community tripartite agreements, CTAs, and it's our experience in some communities that there's perhaps not a great understanding of what enhanced policing is versus core policing. The RCMP welcomes the opportunity to be part of that table when CTAs are renewed. As the minister responded, out of the 146 CTAs we have nationally with 443 members, we are seeing significant vacancies in other areas as well. Unfortunately, oftentimes when there are limited numbers of members in small remote communities, they have to provide a core policing function as well, so they're not adhering to 100% of their policing time. We have to get better at that, so we agree with the Auditor General on that. However, with the optimistic and robust approach we have for recruiting, I believe that we can meet that measure in short time.

• (1245)

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

Thank you for responding to my last question.

I just want to remind everyone that in Nunavut our police are not present in every community, and it affects us in the community and in the territory. Kugluktuk, for instance, and Taloyoak, Arviat and Iqaluit, those communities have headquarters. They start work at 8:30 and they complete the day at 4:30. When they are given a call during those hours they will respond, but in the evening, after hours—after 4:30 in the evening and until the next morning—if you call for the RCMP nobody will respond. Your call will be directed to the Iqaluit headquarters. Once your call is directed to the headquarters in Iqaluit, the recipient does not speak Inuktitut and does not understand the caller. Many people are appreciative that we have policing for our safety, but their hours do not serve the community 24-7, as they should.

[*English*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Chair, Ms. Idlout, thank you for raising that issue. It's obviously very concerning. I'm happy to work with the leadership of the RCMP to see what we can do, and to work with you to ensure that circumstance is mitigated and corrected.

I'm encouraged by conversations I've had with the Premier of Nunavut. I'm also the intergovernmental affairs minister, so I have the opportunity in that function to talk to the territorial premiers, and I remember very clearly the desire of the Government of Nunavut to work with the RCMP. The RCMP has a footprint in many parts—not all parts, as you noted—of your vast territory, but if there are ways that we can work to ensure that footprint is more effective...and I'm obviously particularly sensitive to the linguistic piece that you raised. I'm happy to ensure that we follow up directly with you and ensure that we speak directly to the communities you identified as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Idlout.

We now move to our second round.

First, for five minutes, we have Mr. Shields.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here today. Minister, you have a long history of working with government, so here are a couple of questions for you. Do you know the length of the tripartite agreement that's currently in place?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: My understanding is that they vary among different communities, so I don't—

Mr. Martin Shields: I'm talking about the one that you and I know in our provinces, the tripartite agreement. How long is that agreement—how many years?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: The framework agreement is a 10-year agreement, but there are different.... Is that your question? I want to make sure I—

Mr. Martin Shields: It's the tripartite agreement the provinces signed with the feds. It should be an easy answer. It's 20 years.

I was at the table when that was negotiated in 2012. That's a 20-year agreement you're talking about.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Sorry, I was just told by the assistant deputy minister that it's five years plus five years, but I think we should.... I don't want to leave confusion at the table, but we're happy to come back to that exact agreement with you. I don't want to leave this—

• (1250)

Mr. Martin Shields: It went into effect in 2012 and expires in 2032.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I'm sorry. Maybe, Mr. Chair, if we're talking about the contract policing, I apologize. I thought you were talking about the contribution agreements with respect to first nations and Inuit policing. The contract policing—you're absolutely right—expires in 2032.

Mr. Martin Shields: That's a forty-eight-fifty-two split, which goes to cover indigenous people in a lot of provinces.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, I don't think that's accurate, but perhaps the—

Mr. Martin Shields: You've referred to it a number of times here today already.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: That wasn't the contract policing that we signed with provincial governments to provide contract.... That's the first nations and Inuit policing program, which is separate from the contract policing program we have with—

Mr. Martin Shields: Sorry, I'm going to go back. You and I have our policing through a 20-year agreement.

Of the indigenous self-administered policing contracts you're talking about, what percentage are one year?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, I can't imagine that this is deliberate, but there is certainly significant confusion, I think, at this end of the table in terms of the agreements with provinces and territories to provide contract policing services, like in the city of Moncton where I have a house—

Mr. Martin Shields: Right. I'm moving on to the first nations that we talked about.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: —and then there's the first nations and Inuit policing program, which is the forty-eight-fifty-two cost sharing.

Mr. Martin Shields: Yes, I got that. As you said, we're moving into the other one, the one that you've made with indigenous...when we're talking about self-administered.... What's the length of those contracts?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Chair, with your indulgence, I think the assistant deputy minister might ensure that we all have a common basis of understanding with respect to these different contracts.

Ms. Christine Moran: Thank you, Minister.

There are two types of contracts under the first nations policing agreement. There is a framework agreement with each of the provinces that FNIPP operates in, and, under the framework agreement, there are community tripartite agreements. With respect to self-administered police services, of which we have 36, those are separate agreements with provinces, first nations and the federal government.

Mr. Martin Shields: How long are those contracts?

Ms. Christine Moran: Those contracts vary. They can be as long as 10 years, but it is at the discretion of the first nation, so some of them, in fact, are one year.

Mr. Martin Shields: I agree. It's the same as I was asking before. I asked how many are at one year, how many are at five and how many are at 10. That's what I was looking for. We have the main one we're talking about, you and I. We have 20 years in that contract, but we have no 20-year agreements in those 38 agreements. Why?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: It's a very good question.

Perhaps, Mr. Chair, I'll ask the department to come back to you with the exact number of years for the individual agreements so that everybody has that information.

I think our colleague has identified exactly the challenge I tried to describe in my opening comments, because I think the point is absolutely valid.

In the contract policing that goes on year over year between the Province of New Brunswick and the Government of Canada, or a municipal police force such as the Toronto Police Service or the SPVM—pick your municipal police force—that is the essential element that is not fair to the indigenous policing communities, and that's exactly the issue we're trying to address. I think I share entirely our colleague's concern.

Mr. Martin Shields: You have it. What I'm getting back from those indigenous leaders is that you won't give them the 20 years. They're telling me you won't go to 20 years. You're saying you're negotiating. That's their term. They're telling me you won't go there.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, there's a whole series of different contracts that—

Mr. Martin Shields: I got that, but I'm getting push-back from indigenous chiefs saying that you won't go to 20 years like you and I have—you won't go there.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Well, that's exactly why we think it would be important to have the designation of essential services and the long-term funding, which might be a 10-year agreement renewable for 10 years—there's your 20 years. They would know their police services won't disappear, and they would be in perpetuity like in a municipality or our friends at the RCMP. I share that concern.

Mr. Martin Shields: Good.

I have sat in phone conversations when the bureaucracy...with chiefs. They didn't know I was there. They're pushing hard. I'm hearing the bureaucrats say no. I hear that in phone conversations and in person. The bureaucrats don't know I'm there. The chiefs know I'm there, and that's why I'm there. Your guys are not going there.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Shields.

Minister, if you could submit that information to the committee on those 36 agreements, I think that would be very helpful.

With that, we're moving on to our second questioner in this second round, Mr. McLeod, for five minutes.

• (1255)

Mr. Michael McLeod: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister and his team who are here to talk about indigenous policing. It's a very important issue across the country, but in the riding I represent it's significant.

We have 33 communities in the Northwest Territories and 12 of them don't have any police. I don't believe those would be listed as "vacant positions" under your statistics because there are no police. The concern that's being conveyed to me is that it's putting the leadership, who by default become the peacekeepers in the communities because there's nobody else there, in serious, sometimes very dangerous, predicaments.

I wanted to ask you to explain why no community in the Northwest Territories or Nunavut has signed the tripartite agreement to receive enhanced police services under your program.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: In a conversation you and I had some months ago, Mr. McLeod, I was surprised.... And in fact I discussed

this with the RCMP, and in a subsequent conversation with your premier, who has kept some of this responsibility for himself. I thought it was interesting in my discussions with the new premier about the importance of working with his government that he echoed exactly the concern, Mr. McLeod, that you just shared with us around these communities that do not have specific police resources assigned to them.

It is, as the assistant commissioner noted, a challenge across the country, but it's not one that should excuse a lack of police presence in communities that are in many cases isolated and would require that basic element of public safety.

I don't know if Deputy Commissioner Larkin or Assistant Commissioner Brown can speak to the specific tripartite agreements in the Northwest Territories? Perhaps Assistant Commissioner Brown has that specific answer for Mr. McLeod.

A/Commr Warren Brown: I don't want to volley this back to our colleagues at Public Safety Canada, however, the RCMP is responsible for providing contract policing to a specific province or territory. Presently, we're working with Public Safety Canada, I believe in a consultation phase. I'm not aware if we do have any CTA positions presently in the territories, but I'm hoping that we may get there. I'm not aware of any detachment that is not staffed.

Mr. Michael McLeod: I'm going to interrupt you. Obviously, you're not getting to what I'm talking about.

We seem to have a challenge in the northern territories about trying to have indigenous policing in the territories. When I raised the question with the territorial government, they said they don't have the resources to cost-share either RCMP or indigenous police. When I talk to the federal government, and you're the third minister I've talked to, the response has always been that there is no enabling legislation.

I'm very disappointed that we're still taking this colonial attitude, where we have to have the indigenous government go to a third party for public safety. Why are we not engaging with indigenous governments to set up policing programs when we have resources at the federal level, but we have no partners to take it on because the provinces in some cases—in my situation, the territorial government—do not have the resources to cost-share? Why aren't we discussing this as a possibility for indigenous governments to engage?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Chair, that's exactly what our objective would be, to have indigenous governments and indigenous partners lead the establishment and the maintenance of these police services. This was my conversation with the northern premiers. The challenge is that the provision of RCMP services, as the assistant commissioner noted, is subject to the contract that we would have with the Government of the Northwest Territories. This, in terms of allocating police resources in the territory, is a constant challenge.

They're correct—I see Mr. McLeod smiling—to identify the lack of funding as a concern—

• (1300)

Mr. Michael McLeod: I have to interrupt you because—

The Chair: Mr. McLeod, I'm afraid your time has—

Mr. Michael McLeod: —it has become a hot potato. I hear what you're saying: that it's the territorial government. The territorial government says it's you. Where does it end? Do communities have to declare a state of emergency before somebody will engage? There is no policing.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I take your point, Mr. McLeod—and, Mr. Chair, I know we're out of time. In no way would I seek to pass the hot potato to the new premier, with whom I had a very positive discussion. We got increased funding for indigenous police services in the last budget. I committed to working with the Premier of the Northwest Territories and the RCMP leadership to find the best way to deal with what, at the very root of your question, is a circumstance that should worry all of us.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. McLeod.

Next we are moving to Mr. Lemire.

[Translation]

You have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, we have been waiting for a bill to recognize first nations policing as an essential service for more than five years. Can we establish a link between the Auditor General's rather damning report, the fact that this committee called you to appear today, and your meeting this afternoon to move the file forward?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Lemire, I have already had discussions with the national chief, whom I met for the first time in Winnipeg last fall, I believe. The deputy minister also met with her a few months ago.

I understand the urgency and I accept it. I also recognize that this is not simple in terms of effort. If it were simple, I would like to think that my predecessors may have come up with something. However, I recognize the urgency of taking action, since we all

know the history, whether in your region, in Mr. McLeod's region, in the Northwest Territories, or in other regions.

I'm continuing my work and I hope to move forward as quickly as possible.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: First nations have a very clear expectation. They expect more transparency in legislative processes.

The process of drafting Bill C-61, which concerns water, was particularly appreciated by first nations, as it was a collaborative effort. Are collaborative efforts being made transparently with first nations in the preparation of a bill to recognize indigenous policing as an essential service?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Again, that's a very good question. The success of the bill on water shows that we should draw inspiration from such efforts in the future.

Yes, we are engaged in a discussion on the co-development of an indigenous policing bill with the Assembly of First Nations. I won't hide the fact that the issue of inherent rights is a challenge for us, and not the issue of recognizing indigenous policing as an essential service. Some people have suggested the idea of recognizing an inherent right to police services. So you will understand that we are facing difficult constitutional obstacles.

So I'm trying to co-develop a bill with the Assembly of First Nations based on the good example you used. It's not as direct as I would have liked, but that doesn't stop us from continuing to try, in good faith.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lemire.

[English]

For our last questioner of the second panel here, we have Ms. Idlout for two and a half minutes.

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

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I read the report, I hear and read that the police have no cultural training or cross-cultural training. They have no idea about indigenous lifestyles, and they are not trauma-informed. The Auditor General's report found that the RCMP did not get either cultural or trauma-informed training. Learning this, what changes will be made to ensure that both cultural-specific and trauma-informed training are provided to the RCMP?

[English]

• (1305)

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: I, too, read that, and in my conversations directly with the Auditor General, I discussed that very issue with her. I and the assistant commissioner identified some of the indigenous troops who are going through Depot now.

From my visit to Depot last fall, and from my conversations with officials from the public safety department and the leadership of the RCMP, I think that circumstance has been very significantly improved.

We can always do better and do more, but my conversations with both the commissioner and my colleagues, who are here today, tell me that there are very specific training programs currently in place. It's not only indigenous members who are joining the RCMP, but all members who would serve in Canada's national police force who would benefit from that culturally appropriate training and understanding.

Maybe the assistant commissioner can provide some precise detail. I take the question in the earnestness with which was posed, and certainly commit our government to ensuring that it is not a recurring circumstance. I'm optimistic by the work that's been done, though.

The assistant commissioner can perhaps provide more specific reassurance than my words.

A/Commr Warren Brown: We've just hired our first Inuit cadet, who will be attending Depot this month. They're the first

Inuit member we've hired in the past decade. We've just hired two operators in our dispatch centre in Iqaluit, which you spoke about earlier, who speak Inuktitut. Also, all front counter staff at the Iqaluit detachment speak Inuktitut.

We have a 40-hour training regime at Depot for all RCMP cadets on indigenous studies. That includes the blanket exercise. I was part of the very first training exercise last week, where we now have a floor map journey. That's a more comprehensive lived experience for Inuit, first nations and Métis people for significant dates and the impact the RCMP has had.

I would suggest that while we're not there, we're certainly getting there.

The management action board, as well—

The Chair: Mr. Brown, I'm afraid we've run out of time, but thank you very much.

Thank you very much, Ms. Idlout.

That concludes our second panel.

I want to thank Minister LeBlanc for appearing today, as well as the officials from Public Safety and the RCMP. I know, Minister, that you need to make it to a very important meeting.

With that, we're going to briefly suspend before we go in camera to do some committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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