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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, June 15, 2006

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

CONTENTS

(Table of Contents appears at back of this issue.)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, June 15, 2006

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY ACT

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, allow me, as Minister of Labour, to table the 2005 annual report of the Employment Equity Act.

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[*English*]

CRIMINAL CODE

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-19, An Act to amend the Criminal Code (street racing) and to make a consequential amendment to the Corrections and Conditional Release Act.

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

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CANADA AIRPORTS ACT

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-20, An Act respecting airports, airport authorities and other airport operators and amending the Transportation Appeal Tribunal of Canada Act.

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

* * *

[*Translation*]

AFGHANISTAN

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to announce today that Canada is strengthening its support for the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

[*English*]

As I said on May 17 when this House voted to extend Canada's mission in Afghanistan, our government is helping the people of

Afghanistan to rebuild their shattered nation. We are doing so and we are committed to doing so for three reasons.

First, because our national security is at stake. As North Americans learned on September 11, 2001, terrorism is a menace to us all. It is a global phenomenon and it must be confronted wherever we find it, at home or abroad. We were unmistakably reminded of this by the recent arrests of a number of people charged under Canada's Anti-Terrorism Act.

Second, we are doing this because we are determined to demonstrate Canada's leadership on the world stage and to show that we will pull our weight in United Nations missions.

Third, we are doing this because the government and the people of Afghanistan have asked us to help them, and it is in the nature of Canadians to share the peace and prosperity we have achieved with countries torn by war, poverty or natural disaster.

[*Translation*]

A great deal has been accomplished since Canada and its coalition partners, comprising 35 countries, decided to help the Afghan people stabilize security and 60 nations began the task of rebuilding this country. For example, in the last election, some 12 million Afghans registered to vote—the vast majority for the first time in their lives.

In addition, 3.5 million refugees have been relocated; some 5 million children—a third of them girls—are enrolled in primary school; 120,000 Afghan women have benefited from microcredit to start up their own businesses; vast quantities of heavy arms, ammunition and mines have been turned in, cantonné or destroyed.; and 11,000 villages have been rebuilt in the countryside .

[*English*]

Canada's financial commitment to supporting this important work stands at over \$1 billion over 10 years. Budget 2006 set aside \$100 million for this year alone, but more needs to be done. That is why I am pleased to announce today one more contribution to the rebuilding of Afghanistan, namely, that Canada will provide \$15 million to the Asian Development Bank to help Afghanistan rebuild the country's rural irrigation systems, systems damaged by years of conflict.

[*Translation*]

This is a major initiative. For centuries, the Afghan people have been using traditional irrigation methods to grow their food.

Routine Proceedings

Up to 80% of their agricultural production depends on irrigation, and over half of the national economy depends on agriculture. Thanks to Canada's contribution, a number of irrigation systems will be rebuilt, which will stimulate food production and will help local farmers to grow other crops than poppies which when processed end up on our streets in the form of illegal drugs.

[*English*]

Canadians should be very proud of this country's work in support of the reconstruction of Afghanistan. They can be proud of the courageous personnel of the Canadian Forces, who are working with allied troops, Afghan police and members of the Afghan National Army to enhance security in this country. They can be proud of our diplomats and development workers, who are cooperating with Afghan officials to lay the groundwork for a better life for the people of Afghanistan by providing clean water, mine-free roads and reliable energy sources, and by building more schools and health care facilities.

• (1010)

[*Translation*]

By establishing major institutions such as an independent human rights commission, they are also helping the people of Afghanistan to build their country's democratic infrastructure.

[*English*]

Today's announcement represents one more building block in this work and one more step in a journey we are taking with our allies and the Afghan people to establish a peaceful, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan, an Afghanistan that will never again serve as a safe haven for international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, an Afghanistan that can take its rightful place in the community of nations. This is an important mission, one that our country is proud to be part of.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as you know, our main objective in Afghanistan is to support the Afghan people so that the country becomes stable, democratic and self-sufficient.

[*English*]

We worked with other countries, the United Nations, NATO and various international organizations to provide the security and stability necessary for the implementation of multilateral and bilateral development programs in Afghanistan, to ensure a systematic reconstruction of that country and to rebuild its economic, political and judicial institutions.

The former government committed significant resources of over \$600 million toward achieving these objectives through coordinated investments in development assistance, defence and diplomacy. We are extremely pleased that the government has maintained this commitment. However, several questions arise concerning today's pledge to provide \$15 million to the Asian Development Bank to assist in rebuilding Afghanistan's rural irrigation.

[*Translation*]

We do not know whether this \$100 million comes from the current budget for Afghanistan or is new money.

[*English*]

There are few details of the breakdown of the money contributed to the Asia Pacific development fund. How much of the money will be going toward construction costs, salaries, transportation or security? Is the Asia Pacific development fund already running this project or is this the first contribution?

The House still has not received details from the Minister of International Cooperation as to how this \$100 million is going to be spent this year and how much is going to Kandahar versus the rest of the country. In addition, it is not clear if this initiative will be accomplished in conjunction with a larger agricultural reform program. Although this is alluded to in the speech, what is the exact relation of this program to the ongoing poppy elimination initiatives?

The Prime Minister made reference to Canada's international reputation. First, he stated that this announcement is part of, and I quote him, regaining the trust of our allies. Given Canada's leadership on the world stage and in particular in Afghanistan, it is not clear that we ever lost the trust of our allies.

Second, the Prime Minister refers to "pull[ing] our weight in United Nations missions". Again, it is unclear as to when this was not the case. It is this very commitment in Afghanistan that the Prime Minister and the Minister of National Defence have referred to when asked about the United Nations call for western military engagement in Darfur. The government has been unable to provide the international community with assurances that it has both the capacity and the political will to pull its weight in Darfur.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is rather unusual for a Prime Minister to make a ministerial statement in this House to announce that \$15 million will be provided to the Asian Development Bank. I am glad to hear the news, however, because it means, at least I hope it does, that the Prime Minister realizes now that the multinational intervention in Afghanistan will fail if it is limited to military actions. It is important to give the Afghan people hope and to show them that they can achieve peace and prosperity.

The Prime Minister spoke about children, including over a million young girls, who are now going to school. This is tangible progress that is very encouraging. The Prime Minister also spoke about the women who have received microcredit loans. This is another step forward that we must commend.

The Prime Minister mentioned how important it is for Afghan farmers to have effective irrigation systems, particularly to help them substitute other crops for poppies, and he is right to emphasize this point.

The growing of poppies, which are used to produce heroin, is a blight on the Afghan economy and too often provides a source of funding for warlords. But to reduce poppy growing, we have to offer alternatives to Afghan farmers, in a country that is still largely geared to that industry. We have to develop other crops, use poppies for medicinal purposes and offer legitimate outlets for producers. For example, poppies are used in drugs such as codeine. I therefore urge the government to continue its efforts in this area.

Routine Proceedings

While I applaud the government's reconstruction efforts and the fact that the Prime Minister recognizes the importance of aid, I am concerned when I hear the reasons he gives.

The Prime Minister tells us that it is important to help the Afghans, primarily in order to combat terrorism. That is a short-sighted perspective. Does the Prime Minister not realize that helping the Afghans is important in itself, as it is necessary to help people everywhere who are facing problems of extreme poverty? Does the Prime Minister feel that Canada has to help poverty-stricken peoples only in order to combat terrorism? That sort of thinking seems to me particularly disturbing. Let us not wait for terrorism to find fertile ground in which to grow. Let us tackle poverty and the absence of democracy precisely in order to prevent terrorism from developing. To take the Prime Minister at his word, we would have to wait for a terrorist threat before helping countries in difficulty. That is absurd and disturbing.

The second reason cited by the Prime Minister is that we have to regain the confidence of our international allies. Does that mean that Canada has lost the confidence of its allies? What allies are we talking about? I do not see how Canada has lost the confidence of its allies, unless as a result of Canada's refusal to participate in the war in Iraq. The Prime Minister must understand that a sovereign country can and must make decisions on its own, based on its own interests and its own values. And if it has to disagree with a friendly, neighbouring country, it can disagree with all due courtesy and respect.

Finally, the third reason cited by the Prime Minister is the fact that the Afghan government and the Afghan people are asking for our help. That is a good reason. Canada is helping the Afghans because they are asking for its help. This is also the case with many countries. I am thinking for example of Haiti and numerous African countries.

So I ask the Prime Minister to reflect upon the significance of his own statements and act accordingly by increasing Canadian international aid. The Prime Minister says that Canada will put its full weight behind the United Nations missions. One of those missions is to combat poverty in the world.

I challenge the Prime Minister to adopt a credible and rigorous plan whereby Canada will allocate 0.7% of its GDP to international aid. Nothing can justify terrorism, but we have to realize that injustice, corruption and poverty are the fertile ground of violence and terrorism. If we attack these scourges at their very root we will build a fairer world, one that is less violent and more prosperous.

• (1015)

[English]

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we welcome this announcement of additional funding for development assistance to Afghanistan.

As the leader of the New Democratic Party has stated before in the House, our party and our caucus stands unequivocally behind development assistance to the people of Afghanistan.

We are encouraged by this small commitment that the Prime Minister has made today and we ask the Prime Minister to assure Canadians that Canada will continue to work closely with the Asian Development Bank, and ensure that Canada will seriously consider

contributing to the additional rural development needs identified by the bank.

However, this contribution of development assistance must be compared to the price of the military commitment we have made in Afghanistan. Along with the billions of dollars spent on the counter-insurgency campaign against Taliban remnants, Canada has sadly lost the lives of courageous young men and women. We must always keep the human cost front and centre in all our discussions about our role in Afghanistan.

After a hasty debate and vote, Conservatives and many Liberals approved the new two year mission in Afghanistan, a counter-insurgency mission, with little idea of the cost of this mission or its effectiveness.

Unfortunately, in the House and at the defence committee, we have not had open or genuine debate on all of the aspects of our mission in Afghanistan. The debate has been constrained and in the defence committee, the debate was curtailed. We would like to see genuine debate from the government and engagement with all Canadians about our role in Afghanistan.

We, along with most Canadians, stand in favour of assistance to the security, peace and development of Afghanistan. The development assistance announced today is a small step on the path to achieving those goals.

* * *

• (1020)

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY ACT

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, 20 years ago, Madam Justice Rosalie Silberman Abella, sole commissioner and author of the 1984 Royal Commission on Equality in Employment, paved the way for workplace equality. Her theories on equality and discrimination served as the basis for jurisprudence concerning human rights in Canada. They also had repercussions in several other countries, including New Zealand and Northern Ireland.

In January 1985, in response to the Abella report, the federal government of the day, of which I was a member, adopted Bill C-62, an act respecting employment equity. The purpose of the act was to achieve equality in the workplace so that no person shall be denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability and, in the fulfilment of that goal, to correct the conditions of disadvantage in employment experienced by women, aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities.

Employers subject to the legislation have four obligations: first, to collect information on the presence of members of designated groups in their workforce; second, to analyze underrepresentation of designated groups in each occupational group in their workforce; third, to review their employment systems, policies and practices to identify employment barriers; and last, to prepare a plan describing how they intend to eliminate barriers and adopt positive policies and practices for hiring, training and promoting persons in designated groups.

Routine Proceedings

As well, in relation to the obligations of employers who are subject to this act, and in relation to the consolidation of the information received, I had the honour, a few minutes ago, of tabling the 2005 annual report on employment equity, in both official languages, pursuant to section 20 of the Employment Equity Act. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Employment Equity Act. Here in this very chamber, as a member, I spoke in favour of the Employment Equity Act when it came into force in 1986. I was proud to be part of the team in the Conservative government of Brian Mulroney, which was going to be an historic turning point in the development of the labour market and the Canadian employment mosaic. I continue to strongly support the full participation of all Canadians in our economy and in the advancement of our society, working together with my prime minister.

The findings in this most recent report, which I tabled a few minutes ago, show that there has been undeniable progress, since the four designated groups—women, members of visible minorities, aboriginal people and people with disabilities—are now better represented in the labour market.

If we compare the findings in this report and the figures for this year with the figures for 1987, we see that there has been progress in the representation of members of the four designated groups. It has grown by 38.3%. Women's share has risen from 40.9% to 43.4%; for members of visible minorities, the numbers rose from 5% to 13.3%; for aboriginal people, from 0.7% to 1.7%; and for people with disabilities, from 1.6% to 2.5%.

Clearly, we have made progress in the area of employment equity since this act came into force 20 years ago. At first, some employers were afraid that the strategy was hard to define and complex to implement, but over the last 20 years we have succeeded in making workplaces responsive to the needs and concerns of all employees, women or men, regardless of their culture or physical characteristics, and we continue to make progress in that direction.

We know that if we give women, members of visible minorities, aboriginal people and people with disabilities equal opportunities in the labour market, we can not only strengthen Canada by achieving the objectives set out in the Employment Equity Act, but also take measures that are in fact sound management practices, and make the workforce more productive and more competitive.

●(1025)

As well, we have learned that diversity in our workplaces makes us strong. This means that our work on eliminating discrimination and promoting equity in employment has borne fruit.

At this point, I would like to salute the ongoing effort and commitment of employers to guaranteeing equity, inclusion and equality in the workplace in all federally regulated sectors. The numbers show that we, government and employers, have made consistent progress. But we still have challenges to meet. We recognize that we have to continue working to bridge the gaps that exist in respect of the four designated groups.

We are determined to stay the course, our objective being to reach a level of representation that reflects the available workforce in those groups. We will therefore continue to ensure that Canadian workers

have equitable access to job opportunities, based on their skills and their representation in the Canadian population.

In recent years, the Employment Equity Act has also facilitated the realization of many other goals aimed at making workplaces fair, equitable and accessible for all Canadians. However, workplaces are evolving and we must ensure that they adequately meet current needs. Hence the importance of the five-year review of the act, which will take place shortly, and the review by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills Development, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

As Minister of Labour, I can certainly promote equity in the workplace through legislation, but I am convinced that changes in workplaces really happen when we pool our efforts. Although legislation is important, it is employers who can make the most effective changes. They are dedicated to employment equity and can make things happen. I therefore encourage employers to continue their efforts in this direction.

We know that by promoting diversity and inclusion in our workplaces, we are creating not only better workplaces but also a better Canada. This is why the government is so firmly committed to the principles of employment equity.

In closing, as Minister of Labour and a member of the government that passed this act 20 years ago, I would like to assure the House that I am determined to advance the cause of equity so that all Canadians may actively contribute to their workplace. If I were to sum up the past 20 years of employment equity, I would say that there were some shortcomings, but that we have made real progress, we are heading in the right direction and, together, we must continue to meet the challenge of employment equity for women, visible minorities, aboriginals and people with disabilities. I thank all employers for their efforts to that end.

●(1030)

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, not only are we in favour of tabling this report but we, the Liberals, governed during the last 13 years and did our job. What I find sad, unfortunately, is that back in 1994, when we wanted to improve the Employment Equity Act, the Reform Party, which corresponds to the current Conservative Party, voted against it.

They have a right to change their minds. I know what a progressive fellow my colleague, the Minister of Labour, really is. I hope that, in addition to congratulating employers, he will take his responsibilities seriously, because the federal government has a responsibility. When it comes to equity, employers must try to provide a better workplace environment, while also trying to make a profit. The government has the important task of ensuring that there actually is a decent environment that is conducive to good relations between workers and employers.

It is everyone's responsibility to show that we champion equity in all regards, whether in respect of aboriginals, minorities, people with disabilities or young people.

Routine Proceedings

We were also proud, as the government at the time, to be able to model this pursuant to successful negotiations. In this regard, I want to congratulate the then minister and Treasury Board president. She did outstanding work to ensure this kind of equity between public employees and our government.

Much remains to be done. We live in an aging society. Some situations are considered all too often to be isolated cases when they are actually increasingly frequent. We have to find better ways of reconciling work and family. For example, when family members are sick, there should be a way to ensure some peace of mind on the home front and thereby ensure this equity.

[*English*]

I do not like hearing the minister say that he is pleased with the employers. It is pretty obvious that it is everybody's business, not just the people who hire. It is the government's business and it is our business as members of Parliament. It also a matter of culture, not just legislation. When we talk about aboriginals, visibility minorities, youth and elderly people, we need to show the example. Our role as members of Parliament is to show the example.

We trust everybody but as legislators we should not only promote legislation but every time we have an occasion we should change the laws because they are living things.

Equity is an ongoing issue. We must always be vigilant to ensure Canadians have a decent quality of life, and quality of life means that we need to find a way to fight against the fact that there are still women who, with the same competence and the same skills, receive a salary that is inferior to that of men. We need to work on that.

[*Translation*]

The official opposition will work on this, especially during the sessions of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. As our official labour critic, I offer my help to the labour minister. However, I think that he should take his responsibilities more seriously and not just rely on employers.

I was also rather concerned that he thought it was acceptable for a 12-year-old to work at McDonald's. My 13-year-old daughter does not sell McNuggets; she eats them.

We have to work together to find a solution. We cannot always make the excuse of jurisdictional issues. We have to assume our responsibilities. I am sure that this is not what the minister wanted to say. We will have to work together.

The official opposition is proud to support this report. We know that during the 13 years of Liberal government, we always worked to provide people with a decent environment. Much remains to be done. It is not a partisan issue. We will work together with the government.

• (1035)

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Bloc Québécois is delighted with the way the Employment Equity Act has been enforced.

As the minister said, there is still work to be done. I will refer to his words from time to time in my address: “—we have to continue

working...” “[we must] advance [the file]”, “...I [therefore] encourage employers to continue their efforts”, and “...but we still have challenges to meet—”.

I must say that he is quite right. There is still much to be done before the situation becomes truly equitable for certain groups, namely women, aboriginals, persons with disabilities and visible minorities.

This act was passed 20 years ago, and still things are not all resolved. We are all headed in the right direction, but we feel there is still a lot to be done to reach our objectives. We will all agree that the advances testify to the openness of employers towards groups that were discriminated against, and that sometimes still are.

The Bloc Québécois values diversity, inclusion and respect for differences, as we know. Administrative measures and laws are nevertheless necessary. At present, most of the laws tend towards equity, but not everything has been resolved. There are still a few laws to tie up, such as the one on preventive withdrawal. We feel, though, that these laws provide the catalyst for changing behaviour. It is important for them to exist and to be properly enforced.

As I have already said, there are still obstacles to overcome, notably with regard to women, who naturally are the ones most involved in raising children.

In Quebec, the Government of Quebec has made genuine efforts to eliminate these obstacles, for instance, by putting in place a network of quality daycare centres, at \$7 a day, and by providing better parental leave, which enables women to combine work and family more easily.

Preventive withdrawal legislation also enables pregnant women whose working conditions are not healthy for their fetus or for them to stop working and receive compensation that is considerably better than that offered under federal legislation.

The current government plans to cut \$850 million in transfers to Quebec and give \$1,200 directly to families. This will never compensate for all the work done by Quebec in connection with daycare centres.

Many obstacles remain for the target groups. The Bloc Québécois has been interested in this situation for a long time. In fact, it has proposed bills designed to enable women who work for an employer under federal jurisdiction to take advantage of genuine preventive withdrawal when they need it, and has also proposed measures aimed at better protecting workers from psychological harassment.

In closing, I will say that, as far as employment equity is concerned, laws must exist. As I mentioned earlier, this is the catalyst for changing the sorts of behaviour that should now be improved.

[*English*]

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak in the House today on behalf of the New Democrats in response to the minister's comments as a result of the tabling of the Employment Equity Act annual report. I certainly agree with what the minister said. We have learned that diversity in the workplace makes us strong. This is the 20th anniversary of this important legislation.

Routine Proceedings

I agree with other members who have said that to have legislation that lays out clear objectives and goals to ensure that the federal government is a major employer but also a federally regulated employer are actually meeting obligations for employment equity but diversity in the workplace is something that is important. It is not just something that can be done on a voluntary basis through goodwill. It has to be an established practice with rules, regulations and consequences. That has basically been what the Employment Equity Act has been about.

I was fortunate to participate in the previous five year review at the HRSDC committee. It was an interesting process and I learned a lot of things. One thing I learned is that, in actual fact, some of the private sector employers have done very well, like banks and airlines, because they have actually recognized from a business point of view the importance of having diversity in the workplace. Having women, visible minorities, aboriginal people and persons with disabilities in the workplace actually provides them with a better capacity to serve a diverse population, their own clientele. It was quite remarkable to see that large, federally regulated employers were making great advances.

Advances have also been made by the federal government in its very strict requirements about meeting obligations. However, a lot of work still needs to be done. This issue requires constant education within the workplace. There are still barriers, stereotypes and things that discriminate against visible minorities, women, persons with disabilities and aboriginal people. We must be constantly vigilant. It cannot just be an annual report. We need a process within the workplace to deal with systemic discrimination and the barriers that exist.

I would point out that there are some things that are very concerning. For example, as a result of some studies we know that approximately 25% of applications to the federal government are from visible minorities. However, the appointment rate is at about 10%. We also know that the number of people who leave is much higher.

There are some real issues in terms of what happens, one, in terms of people being hired and that barriers still exist and, two, what happens to people once they are within the public service with regard to promotions and discrimination that may not be overt but which is what we consider to be systemic discrimination.

The other thing that will be very critical in this review is to ensure there is a meaningful role and dialogue with unions that represent their members in the workplace. This was an issue in the last five year review. PSAC and other unions are dedicated and committed to employment equity and it is important to ensure they are fully involved in this review, in this process and in the ongoing practice of the implementation and enforcement of this act.

Employment equity, in its broadest terms, also deals with the issue of pay equity. I would note for the minister that we are still waiting to see the long awaited pay equity legislation. We know a report was tabled two years ago. This is a huge issue for women within the public service and women generally. We want to ensure the pay equity report is implemented by way of legislation because it is a critical component of employment equity.

Finally, in a broad policy context, as the member from the Bloc raised, if we want to talk about women's participation in the workforce, we need to address the issues of what it means to face a lack of child care accessibility and extraordinarily high child care costs.

• (1040)

We cannot divorce these issues. They are integral to the equality of women in our country. They are integral to employment equity. If our workplace is to be truly diverse and represent a qualified work pool, then we have to provide the resources and the supports that allow women to fully participate in the workforce.

Those are just some of the issues that we would flag. We are glad the report has been tabled. We look forward to the review at the committee and we will participate fully in it. We hope to strengthen and improve the federal government's employment equity act and make it a real tool of leadership that employers can follow to ensure there is fairness, justice and equity in the workplace.

* * *

• (1045)

INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. Bob Mills (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1) I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, two reports of the Canada-United States Interparliamentary Group.

The first report is "The Emergence of Cross-Border Regions Between Canada and the United States", Ottawa Round Table, hosted by the policy research initiative, Privy Council Office and the Canada-United States Interparliamentary Group, held in Ottawa on March 6 and 7.

The second report is on the participation of Senator Jerry Grafstein, co-chair of the Canada-United States Interparliamentary Group, at Great Lakes Day, held in the United States Congress, Washington, D.C. on March 16.

* * *

[Translation]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Guy Lauzon (Stormont—Dundas—South Glengarry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present, in both official languages, the first report of the Standing Committee on Official Languages.

[English]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(f) the committee has considered the matter of the application of the Official Languages Act to ACE Aviation Holdings Inc. following the restructuring of Air Canada.

*Routine Proceedings***PETITIONS**

CANADA POST

Hon. Andy Scott (Fredericton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure to present a number of petitions with regard to rural mail delivery.

The petitioners state that Canada has traditionally supported home delivery across the country in a timely and efficient manner. Many Canadian seniors, people who are sick and shut-ins, face significant obstacles to transportation.

The petitioners from Rusagonis, Royal Road, Marysville, Douglas, Lincoln, Noonan and McLeod Hill, in and around my constituency, call upon the House of Commons and the minister responsible for Canada Post to maintain the traditional mail service instead of implementing changes, causing people to travel long distances from their homes to receive their mail.

CHILD CARE

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36 I am pleased to present a petition from 30 people from the beautiful riding of New Brunswick Southwest.

The petitioners ask the minority Parliament to work with the provinces and territories to provide funding to build high quality, accessible, affordable, community-based child care and to ensure fair and effective income support programs for Canadian families.

AUTISM

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to table a petition in the House today, which I support, that is signed by more than 150 people from my constituency of Hamilton Mountain.

The petitioners request Parliament to call upon the government to amend the Canada Health Act and corresponding regulations to include IBI/ABA therapy as medically necessary for children with autism and that all provinces be required to fund this essential treatment for autism.

They also call upon the government to create an academic chair at a university in each province to teach IBI/ABA treatments to undergraduates and doctoral level students so Canadian professionals will no longer be forced to leave the country to receive academic training in the field and Canada will be able to develop the capacity to provide every Canadian with autism with the best IBI/ABA treatment available.

CHILD CARE

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present today a petition signed by a number of people from Saskatchewan, noting the agreements entered into in April of 2005 between the Government of Canada and the province of Saskatchewan, together with other provinces, with respect to early learning and child care.

The individuals, who have signed the petition, obviously support those agreements. They support a national system that increases child care spaces.

They call upon the Government of Canada to honour the agreements that were in place in 2005 and to provide, therefore, the full funding.

Mr. John Maloney (Welland, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36 I have two petitions to present.

The petitioners acknowledge that 84% of parents with children are both in the workforce, that today 70% of women with children under the age of six are employed and that child care as a consequence is an everyday necessity.

The petitioners call upon the Prime Minister and the government to honour and acknowledge the early learning and child care agreements with the province of Ontario.

• (1050)

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure to present two more petitions from people in my community.

The petitioners are concerned about the government's plan to kill the national child care deal. They are also concerned about the inequity of how the universal child care allowance will be distributed and that it will disproportionately help people who need it the least in many cases.

I am pleased that my boss, the hon. Leader of the Opposition, will be in the riding of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour meeting with some of these people this weekend.

* * *

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the following questions will be answered today: Nos. 19 and 24.

[Text]

Question No. 19—**Hon. John McCallum:**

With regard to the government's fiscal and economic policy: (a) how much per year does the average person earning less than the basic personal exemption pay in GST; (b) how much money per year would the average person earning less than the basic personal amount save from a one percent reduction in the GST; (c) how much does the average person earning \$200,000 per year pay in GST; (d) how much have the average and median personal incomes, before federal tax, increased since 1993; (e) how much have the average and median personal incomes, after federal tax, increased since 1993; (f) how much have the average and median family incomes, before federal tax, increased since 1993; (g) how much have average and median family incomes, after federal tax, increased since 1993; (h) how much less or more tax did a person earning the median income in Canada pay in 2005 versus 1993 after adjusting for inflation and wage increases; and (i) how many jobs were created in Canada between 1993 and 2006?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the answer is as follows:

a) On average, individuals with total income less than \$8,500 would have paid \$315 in GST in 2007 had the tax rate stayed at 7%.

b) If an individual would have paid \$315 in GST at 7%, the one-percentage point reduction would reduce his/her GST by \$45, on average.

Business of Supply

c) On average, those with \$200,000 income would have paid \$6,285 in GST in 2007 had the tax rate stayed at 7%.

The responses to questions a) to c) were estimated by Finance Canada using the Statistics Canada Social Policy Database and Model.

d) to h) The information necessary to answer these questions can be found in the Statistics Canada publication: *Income Trends in Canada* (Catalogue no. 13F0022XIE), which is available at the following web-address: <http://www.statcan.ca/registered/IPS/Z2aZ-dU6u5bgfs/english/13F0022XIE/00004/products.htm>

i) This information can be found in the Statistics Canada publication: *Labour Force Historical Review 2005*, (Catalogue no. 71F0004XCB), which is available at the following web-address: <http://www.statcan.ca/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=71F0004X>

Question No. 24—**Hon. Ken Dryden:**

With regard to government compensation to all victims who received blood tainted with Hepatitis C: (a) how many people are currently receiving compensation; (b) how many people have already received full compensation; (c) how many people are waiting for compensation; (d) how long will it take for all victims to receive compensation; and (e) what is the current status of negotiations between the government and the representatives of the class action suit?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Health and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the answer is as follows:

a) Compensation to those infected by hepatitis C through the Canadian blood system has been provided by numerous sources. Approximately 6000 individuals were compensated through the federal/provincial/territorial agreement reached in 1999 to compensate those infected from January 1, 1986 to July 1, 1990. Individuals infected outside this window have received compensation through the insolvency of the Red Cross and depending on the province, from their provincial governments.

b) There is no definition of “full compensation”. One way to interpret full compensation is when the Courts have approved compensation packages as being in the best interests of the class and fair. The 1986-1990 class has received a generous compensation package and approximately 6000 individuals have received it.

c) If this is intended to mean those who are waiting for compensation from the federal government, the exact class size would be determined through the eligibility criteria of a final settlement agreement.

d) The Government of Canada fully intends to proceed with its commitment to provide compensation to those infected with hepatitis C through the blood system. Discussions are taking place with counsel representing those infected before January 1, 1986 and after July 1, 1990. Much work is taking place at the present time to make progress on a settlement and a compensation arrangement. Given that this is a negotiation, no firm date can be given as to when a final agreement will be reached, but the government is committed to compensating the class as quickly as possible.

e) Both parties in the negotiation have agreed that the substance of the discussions would remain between them, and stay at the negotiating table. I must respect this agreement but I can assure you

that significant work is underway at the present time to make progress on a final settlement agreement. Discussions are taking place and we will compensate the class as quickly as possible. The most recent negotiating session was held May 24-26, 2006.

[English]

Mr. Tom Lukiwski: Mr. Speaker, I ask that all remaining questions be allowed to stand.

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: Before proceeding to orders of the day, I wish to inform the House that because of the ministerial statements government orders will be extended by 39 minutes.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—SENIORS

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should rectify decades of underfunding of seniors programs by: (a) creating a Seniors Charter that recognizes older Canadians as creative, active and valued members of our society, and that this Charter shall enshrine the right of every senior living in Canada to the following: (i) income security, through protected pensions and indexed public income support that provides a reasonable state of economic welfare; (ii) housing, through secure accessible, and affordable housing; (iii) wellness, through health promotion and preventative care; (iv) health care, through secure, public, accessible, universal health care including primary care, dental care, homecare, palliative and geriatric care, and pharmacare; (v) self-development, through lifelong access to affordable recreation, education and training, (vi) government services, through timely access to all federal government services and programs, including family re-unification; and (b) creating a Seniors Advocate to: (i) conduct public education and awareness initiatives on the rights of seniors; (ii) ensure that all new or revised policies and programs affecting seniors receive public input from older persons; (iii) require that all new policies and programs affecting seniors are announced with specific timelines for implementation; (iv) act as an Ombudsman for seniors with respect to all government services and programs making recommendations as appropriate and that this Seniors Advocate publish and report annually to Parliament on government policies and programs affecting seniors, including the effectiveness of federal funding related to the needs of older persons.

She said: Mr. Speaker, let me begin this morning's debate on my opposition day motion by thanking my leader, the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth, for providing me with this amazing opportunity to speak to the importance of seniors to Canada's socio-economic fabric.

As members in the House will know, opportunities for opposition members to propose and actually debate their policy positions are rare. In fact, in this entire first sitting of Parliament, New Democrats only have two opportunities to bring forward opposition day motions. For my leader and the entire NDP caucus to agree that seniors' issues were so important that they needed to be discussed in one of these rare opportunities, speaks to the profound commitment that our party has to ensuring that the concerns of older adults are being heard and addressed in the single most important democratic institution in our country, in the House of Commons.

Business of Supply

Let us be clear, while we may be thinking about these issues today in terms of our parents and grandparents, our handling of their concerns will affect not just them, but also our generation and that of our children.

As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, at the launching of the International Year of Older Persons on October 1, 1998, we must move toward “a society that does not caricature older persons as pensioners, but sees them as both agents and beneficiaries of development”. Eight years later, we still have a long way to go in achieving that goal in Canada. I am hopeful that my motion will move the yardstick in a meaningful way toward realizing that international objective.

Let me begin by explaining the details of my motion, the rationale behind its key components and the desired effect of adopting the motion today. Unfortunately, my time to do so is limited, but since our party recognizes the importance of seniors' issues in all aspects of policy-making, my colleagues will continue to speak after me about the motion in the specific context of their own critic portfolios as well as their own legislative initiatives that will live up to the commitments we make to seniors through the charter today.

First and foremost, the motion builds on the incredible work done in the last Parliament by my colleague the member for Windsor West in recognizing that seniors have the right to a fulfilling life with dignity, respect and security. Moreover, the motion recognizes that it is the responsibility of government to protect those rights and freedoms of the aging in our society.

To that end, my motion begins by advocating for the adoption of a seniors charter for Canadians that would enshrine six specific rights into law.

First, every senior in Canada has the right to income security. In a series of polls conducted by the Canadian Labour Congress in 2004, 73% of Canadians polled said they worried about not having enough income to live after retirement, up by almost 20% from two years before.

Canadians are worried about the solvency of their private pensions, the adequacy of both CPP and public income support and their ability to cope with what Statistics Canada confirms is a higher inflation rate for seniors and for the average Canadian, and those fears are well founded.

Since the middle 1990s, the income of seniors has reached a ceiling and the gap between the revenues of seniors and those of other Canadians is now increasing. According to the government's own National Advisory Council on Aging, between 1997 and 2003, the mean income of senior households increased by \$4,100, while the average income of other Canadian households increased by \$9,000. The situation is even more pronounced for seniors living alone.

In total, over a quarter million seniors live under the low income cutoff line or, as we more commonly say, live below the poverty line. In my home town of Hamilton, the poverty rate for seniors is a staggering 24%. For unattached seniors, that rate rises to 45% among men and an unbelievable 58% of women.

It should further be noted that private retirement savings are concentrated in a small percentage of families. According to Statistics Canada, 25% of families hold 84% of these assets, while three out of ten families have no private pensions at all.

While income security for seniors thus needs to include pension protection, the real solution lies in an indexed public income support system that provides a reasonable state of economic welfare. Our seniors' charter enshrines that right in the law. Our charter also recognizes, however, that economic vulnerability is not only about insufficiency of income, but also about the loss of dignity and social inclusion.

• (1055)

There are few definitions of economic vulnerability, but its opposite, economic security, has been defined by the Canadian Council on Social Development:

Economic security refers to an assured and stable standard of living that provides individuals and families with a level of resources and benefits necessary to participate economically, politically, socially, culturally, and with dignity in their community's activities.

In other words, security requires not just a sufficient income, but also a level of dignity and social inclusion. Thus, our seniors charter also addresses issues of health and wellness, housing, self-development through lifelong learning, and access to government services and programs. Let me briefly touch on each of these.

With respect to housing, it is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of seniors live in a private residence as opposed to a health care institution, 93% versus 7%. Contrary to stereotypes, most seniors are active and independent contributors to our society. Paying for shelter is a major expense for seniors. According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, in 2001 more than half of seniors living on their own in rental accommodation were in core housing need. That is to say that 30% of their income or more was not sufficient to pay the median rent for housing of an acceptable size and quality in their location. In fact, many seniors are currently paying between 50% and 90% of their income on housing. After the federal government froze investments in social housing in 1993, the availability of rental units dropped sharply in large cities. As a result, rental costs soared and the quality of lodging decreased.

The United Nations charter of rights recognizes shelter as a guaranteed right. It is time for Canada to act on that guarantee by enshrining into law the right of every senior to secure, accessible and affordable housing. I am pleased to say that our seniors charter does precisely that.

Business of Supply

The same is true of health care. All too often politicians pay lip service during election campaigns to the universality of Canadian health care, but then once in office conveniently blame their draconian decisions on the financial burden placed on the system by our aging population. The reality is that health care is not being drained by our seniors. In fact, the consensus of expert opinion suggests that aging will add only 1% to 2% annually to health care costs over ensuing years, an increase that is quite manageable. New drugs and technologies are keeping people healthier longer and there is an increased awareness among people about the benefits of active, healthy lifestyles.

To that end, our seniors charter adds wellness in addition to health care as a right of every senior living in Canada. If we focus up front on health promotion and preventative care, not only will seniors be able to continue to engage in active participation in all facets of life, but the cost on our health care system will also be contained. By keeping people healthier through a cleaner environment, greater food safety, better diets, better home supports and a more holistic approach to health care, we can improve the health of our nation and realize significant savings on the acute care side.

We must ensure that the Canadian health care system as a whole, including primary care, home care, geriatric and palliative care, as well as pharmacare, complies with the five conditions of the Canada Health Act not just in law but in spirit. There should be no back door measures to privatized health care where the size of one's wallet determines when and whether one receives care. Canadian health care must be publicly administered, comprehensive, universal, portable and accessible. These rights are reinforced and detailed in our charter for every senior living in Canada.

Our charter recognizes for the first time the right of every senior in Canada to free dental care. Dental associations right across the country recognize that good oral health is a determinant of good overall health. With the two inextricably linked, it is inconceivable that a charter which enshrines health care as a fundamental right would not also include dental care. I am proud that my motion takes that important step in the health promotion of older adults.

The enhanced wellness of seniors as well as new drugs and medical technologies will continue to enhance their longevity. Already, older adults are continuing to make important contributions to our country's socio-economic fabric for an average of an additional 20 years. We must support and maximize this opportunity for engagement by ensuring that seniors can participate in continuous self-development through affordable recreation and lifelong education and training.

• (1100)

We need to formally recognize that the expertise and experience of older adults is unique and crucial for exchanging knowledge between generations. This is often referred to as intergenerational solidarity. In other words, how much we invest in educational programs and other learning environments for our seniors will directly correlate with how much seniors can give back to the other age groups. Not only is this a benefit to Canada as a whole, but it increases participation among seniors and reduces feelings of being marginalized, a key component of security as I have outlined above.

Last, these commitments made in the charter must be backed up by a commitment to ensure that seniors have timely access to all federal government services and programs.

In the absence of a cabinet minister directly responsible for seniors, it is essential that there be a coordinated system where seniors can learn about and receive help with the variety of income support, health, housing, family reunification, education and other initiatives available to them. If seniors cannot access the programs and services that were designed for them, then those programs and services are not worth the paper they are written on.

That brings me to the last element of my opposition day motion. Rights that cannot be accessed are no rights at all. It is essential that these rights be promoted and enforced. To that end, our motion calls for the creation of a seniors advocate.

Since the government has refused to appoint a minister for seniors, someone who actually sits at the cabinet table and participates in decision making, it is essential that the charter be brought to life by someone else who has the ability to report annually to Parliament and to make recommendations about the adequacy and efficacy of federal government programs and services with respect to seniors. To that end, we are envisioning that the seniors advocate would fulfill five crucial functions.

First, she would conduct public education and awareness initiatives on the rights of seniors. For example, as recently as 2001, over 200,000 Canadian seniors were unaware that they were legitimately entitled to receive the GIS, the guaranteed income supplement. Effective outreach can decrease these numbers dramatically. It would be the role of the seniors advocate to identify these areas and develop strategies for informing seniors of their rights.

Second, it is essential that older adults be directly involved in designing policies and programs that affect them. The seniors advocate would be mandated to ensure that this crucial component of seniors engagement be acted upon by the government.

Third, it is important that all new policies and programs affecting seniors are announced with specific timelines for implementation. After 13 years of broken promises on everything from a pharmacare program to affordable housing and enhanced income security, seniors are tired of election rhetoric. They want and deserve to know that plans are being announced with specific timetables for action. The seniors advocate would ensure that that would happen.

Last, the seniors advocate would act as an ombudsperson for older persons, a one stop access point for seniors to access information and seek redress on all government services and programs affecting them.

Business of Supply

The seniors advocate would then report annually to Parliament on all of her advocacy and policy work so that there would be real accountability on the government's agenda for seniors.

Seniors have worked hard all of their lives. They have played by the rules. Now they simply want access to the programs and services that their hard-earned tax dollars helped build. These programs are essential to their full participation in Canadian society. They allow seniors to retire with the dignity and respect they deserve.

As politicians, we have an obligation to make that happen. It is time that we abandoned partisan rhetoric and acted as one to stand up for our seniors. I urge all members of the House to support our motion so that together we can protect the rights and freedoms of the aging in our society.

• (1105)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Newton—North Delta, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first of all I would like to congratulate the NDP for bringing forward this motion which will play catch-up with the policies for seniors that were brought in by the Liberals.

In fact, I would not agree with the member when she said that nothing was done for 13 years. If she looks at the 13 year record for seniors, the percentage of lower income seniors dropped from 11% to 5.6% in 2004.

At the same time I have trouble with the progressive party of Tommy Douglas, Ed Broadbent, Audrey McLaughlin, and even the member for Halifax who has obviously been progressive. That party is getting away from those values and is sacrificing those values for political gain.

I will support this motion, but at the same time I have trouble when it comes to the partisan policies and that party's support for the same Conservatives that want regression for our seniors.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's support.

I do think we disagree on the economic well-being of seniors in our country right now. We know that as of 2004 about one-third of seniors, most of whom were single women, were dependent on OAS and GIS. They were living on about \$12,400 a year. The low income cutoff is \$17,000 a year. We are forcing seniors to live in poverty.

It was the Liberal government that was in office at the time. Yes, there was a small increase to the GIS, but the reality is we are forcing more and more seniors into poverty because what we are offering them in terms of public income support is not enough to keep up with the increasing cost of living.

Frankly, Statistics Canada confirms that the cost of living rises more for seniors than it does for any other part of the population. We need to take this seriously. We need to address it today. Collectively as members of this House we have a responsibility to do that. We have an opportunity to do it by supporting this motion today.

[Translation]

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the motion speaks of the respect and security to which seniors are entitled, particularly older women. I agree and I am in favour of this. However, this motion really bothers me because of phrases such as "underfunding of seniors programs". That is true. Action is also

called for in the sectors of health and pharmacare, with recreation, education, training and families also mentioned. Thus, I would ask the member how will she reconcile all this with provincial jurisdiction? We must remember that these are areas of provincial jurisdiction.

For years, the Bloc Québécois has made demands regarding the guaranteed income supplement. The federal government has never properly seen to the interests of seniors and now it wants to cover such a vast array of items with this motion to solve problems not within its jurisdiction.

We would be happy with a transfer of the required funds, no strings attached, so that the government closest to seniors could deal with the difficulties they experience.

• (1110)

[English]

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I certainly understand some of the difficulties in our country when jurisdiction for things like health care is actually divided between the provincial and the federal governments, but we do have a Canada Health Act. Canadians do have a right to access to health care, the same in St. John's, Newfoundland as in Victoria, B.C. We should not have two standards of care anywhere in our country.

Canadians do not want us to engage in finger pointing saying that it is the responsibility of the provincial government and we do not need to do anything, or it is the responsibility of the federal government. Seniors deserve more than for us to pass the buck. We need to take responsibility. We were elected to this House to address the concerns of our constituents and it is not good enough to say that this is provincial responsibility. We have a role, we have it through the Canada Health Act.

We have a ton of opportunities to make a meaningful difference in the lives of seniors. I want us to seize that opportunity and run with it today.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to applaud the very sincere and articulate presentation by my hon. friend in the NDP. As all members of the House do, I share her concern for seniors issues. I am not a senior yet, but I can see it from where I am.

We did take some positive measures in budget 2006. Clearly people would like us to do more and I appreciate that. We are still working on establishing a national seniors council which is similar to the body the member talked about.

I do have one question. There is always the matter of what things will cost. It is not a combative question, but I would like to know if the member has costed out the program. Does she have an estimate of what the programs she has outlined would cost?

Business of Supply

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, we have costed out most of the aspects of our proposed seniors charter. Obviously this charter is a statement of principle. It engages in six particular areas. There are elements, for example, the free dental care, the free prescription drugs, the national housing strategy, all of which we have costed out. In terms of implementing all of the specifics of the principles, obviously that would be up to the government to decide as it would have to take primary responsibility for the implementation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I was listening to the hon. member and I found this motion very surprising.

I was a CLSC social worker for a number of years, for 20 years, before I came here. In Quebec, and throughout the country, the population is aging. Our society is getting older. The home support services provided through the CLSCs and our entire system in Quebec need resources and money.

In my opinion, the solution does not lie in developing or enhancing federal structures. The solution lies more along the lines of transferring the federal government's surplus to Quebec, to the other provinces and to the territories so that they can provide more services and enhanced services to the public and to seniors. In Quebec, this is done through the CLSCs.

I have trouble understanding this motion. When the hon. member says she wants us to invest in education and health and so on, this means giving more money to the federal government to provide the services.

In Quebec, we have our health care system. We need more resources, both financial and human, in order to provide services directly to the people in our province. It is not a matter of enhancing other structures. Our structures already exist and need financial resources.

I would have preferred a motion that would have allocated more transfers for health to the provinces and Quebec so that they can provide more services for the growing needs of the public.

• (1115)

[*English*]

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I do not think anybody in this House would disagree that provinces would not benefit hugely from additional transfers from the federal government. In fact, there has been significant underfunding for the last 13 years. In part, that is what this motion is trying to redress.

While I appreciate that the member is suggesting that all the surplus money should go into Quebec, I would suggest there are other members in this House who think we should share the wealth and actually create universality of programs right across the country. That is what this motion would intend to do.

Seniors in every part of this country have a right to decent health care, lifelong learning, affordable housing, income security, and that would be the purpose of this charter.

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last Saturday six members of the B.C. NDP federal caucus visited the riding of Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca. One of the things we did was to

meet with seniors organizations. One of the people I met was Mrs. Janette George of the Retired Teachers' Association of the greater Victoria area. One of the key things that she wanted to raise was the question of elder abuse.

We know that today is Elder Abuse Awareness Day. My colleague from Hamilton Mountain raised that in the House yesterday and called on the government to proclaim elder abuse as a federal awareness day.

The folks from the Retired Teachers' Association noted that seniors were vulnerable to all kinds of abuse from outside and inside their families, by family members, by spouses, by institutions and the mental health system. There is often pressure to move them out of their homes and into institutions. Some of the services to help with this are really lacking. Something like the seniors help line has a long waiting time and often the services provided are from individuals, not necessarily from groups. This was a real area that they wanted to see the government show some leadership.

I am wondering if my colleague could comment on that.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague on his commitment to doing everything he can to eradicate elder abuse.

This is a crime that has often been called “the hidden crime” in Canada because so many elderly people are afraid to report when they have been the subject of neglect or abuse. Oftentimes that actually may happen at the hands of family members. There is a fear of reprisals and a fear of consequences. In fact, sometimes there is a sense of shame, among seniors. This is an issue that we need to address.

I asked the Minister of Canadian Heritage whether we could proclaim, as a first step in raising awareness on this issue, today national elder abuse awareness day. Unfortunately, that request was declined. I am still optimistic that as members of the House, we can work jointly to make that happen before the end of today.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for St. John's East.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak today to the motion presented by the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain. Today's seniors have witnessed unprecedented changes in their lifetimes: depression and war, good times and bad times, and wave after wave of new technology. Through it all, they have worked hard, raised their families and built our communities. They saved for their future and paid their taxes to support public pensions, and when they entered their golden years, they have relied on those pensions and savings to be there for them when they needed it.

Today's seniors lead more vital and active lives than ever before. If Canadian seniors are generally better off today than in past generations, it is partly because parties of all stripes have been committed to securing retirement income in Canada.

Today our government is committed to protect those gains for all of our seniors by securing and building on our pension system. Conservative governments have done their part over the past 70 years to build our public pension system and we will honour those commitments.

Business of Supply

Let me assure the House that the Government of Canada is committed to seeing all Canadian seniors treated with dignity and respect, the respect and dignity that they deserve in every aspect of their lives. Canadian seniors have spent their entire lives helping to build this country through their hard work. This government is proud to stand up for them and ensure their social and economic well-being. We recognize and respect the vast and varied contributions that seniors in Canada have made and continue to make.

The riding of Blackstrap, which I represent, includes a very vibrant and active seniors community. Last fall during Saskatchewan's centennial celebrations, I went to each and every one of the seniors residences and homes, such as: Zemer Court, Scott Forget Towers, Legion Manor, Ilarion, McClure Manor, St. Volodymyr, Elim Lodge, Luther Riverside Terrace, Emmanuel Village, Circle Drive Place, Extendicare Preston and Sunnyside.

Having this many seniors homes in my riding tells me that we are on the right track with seniors. We are helping them to enjoy good retirements and we are providing very good accommodations. Many of them are very faith based and have quality lives in these residences. I can generally say that seniors are among the most politically active and knowledgeable. Many times I have been challenged by different residents.

Across the country during the month of June many regions of Canada are celebrating seniors through a special week or month. Seniors who have given so much of themselves deserve to be treated with the respect that they are due. When they are trying to get information about pensions or other government programs, it is not acceptable for them to be ignored, treated rudely or stuck in voicemail when they are trying to get answers to their questions.

To further ensure there is accountability for how seniors are treated and to ensure that seniors have a voice in government policy decisions, our government will appoint a national seniors council. The seniors council will be made up of seniors and representatives of seniors organizations to advise the minister responsible for seniors on significant issues affecting them.

Canada's seniors make up the fastest growing population in Canadian society. In the decades to come, the proportion of Canadians over the age of 64 is expected to almost double from 13% in 2001 to 24% in 2031. We want to be ready for this unprecedented rate of growth and have policies, programs and services in place that meet the changing needs of seniors today and in the future.

• (1120)

As the lead federal department for seniors, Human Resources and Social Development Canada works together with the provincial, territorial governments and other partners to ensure the well-being of all Canadian seniors.

Hon. members will be familiar with some of the numerous programs and services that the provinces and territories have available for seniors. Allow me to demonstrate some of the concrete ways that the Government of Canada is addressing the particular needs and concerns of seniors.

First and foremost, we are committed to maintaining the Canada pension plan, the old age security plan, and the guaranteed income

supplement. These are and will remain fundamental guarantees of income security for seniors in their retirement years. As the House may know, Canada's retirement income system is recognized internationally as one of the finest in the world.

As part of our commitment to the continued sustainability of Canada's income security system, we will be working with the provinces to examine the possibility of allocating a portion of future federal surpluses to the Canada and Quebec pension plans. This would allow the unplanned surpluses to be used for the future benefit of Canadians.

Seniors in Canada today receive more than \$50 billion a year in direct income through the Canada pension plan and old age security benefits. Over 4 million seniors are receiving old age security benefits and more than 3 million are receiving Canada pension plan retirement pensions.

Our 2006 budget proposes an increase to the maximum amount eligible for the pension income credit to \$2,000, effective this year. This measure will benefit nearly 2.7 million taxpayers with pension incomes and it will remove approximately 85,000 pensioners from the tax rolls.

Furthermore, effective July 1, the GST will be reduced by 1%. This tax cut will help all seniors to save all year round with every purchase they make.

Public transit is often the only means of transportation for seniors. Our government has provided relief in budget 2006 by making transit passes and tickets tax deductible. This measure will encourage public transit use by providing \$150 million in 2006-07 and \$220 million in 2007-08 in benefits to approximately 2 million Canadians who make a sustained commitment to use this environmentally friendly mode of transportation. All transit users, including commuters, students and seniors will qualify and benefit.

As I noted earlier, our recognition of seniors' past, present and future contributions is founded in a deep and abiding respect. We are committed to seeing all Canadian seniors live in comfort and dignity. We will protect and ensure their well-being.

• (1125)

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the parliamentary secretary's participation in this debate.

I have a specific concern about one area where I have not seen much progress and which is of huge concern to seniors in my community. As the minister will know, when people are eligible for the GIS, they actually have to apply to get that benefit. For many seniors in my community, in the first instance they may not be aware that they need to apply. They often are not aware that they need to reapply. Language and other things are barriers.

Yet, we have a system in place for this very fundamental income support where seniors can only claim retroactively for 11 months. This is a huge disadvantage for seniors, not just in my community of Hamilton Mountain but right across the country.

Business of Supply

Similarly, if someone is late applying for their Canada pension plan benefit, they can only claim that retroactively for 11 months. This is not the government's money. CPP is being contributed to by employers and employees. That retroactivity of 11 months is outrageous.

Can the minister let me know what her government thinks about addressing those very real concerns about our income support system that could make an immediate difference for seniors in my community today?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member bringing that up because that was a real issue in the last Parliament. It was one of the measures that we wanted to bring forward. It should be automatic that the guaranteed income supplement should be a direct mailing of the application forms and there should be information campaigns and partnerships to try to contact vulnerable communities of seniors who are difficult to reach.

Each year about 1.3 million GIS recipients whose tax returns confirm eligibility are automatically renewed. There should not be any problems with the renewals, nor should they have to do it every year. It should be automatic. I could not agree more with the member.

On the retroactivity, it is in line with the other pension plans or other programs. We are staying in line with that so we can sustain the income program that is there.

We are committed to making a concerted effort to inform all potential recipients of their eligibility for the benefit and we will continue to undertake extensive outreach to these seniors.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to hear my colleague say that.

I would like to know more about what she intends to do to inform seniors of their right to the guaranteed income supplement and to the Canada pension plan.

The previous government employed entities that were not used by seniors very much. It was difficult to locate seniors who were entitled to the guaranteed income supplement.

Does she intend to pay the seniors full retroactivity on the guaranteed income supplement, as was unanimously agreed upon in a vote here in this House?

• (1130)

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: Mr. Speaker, again, I appreciate that question. We are using the direct mailing of the application forms. There are information campaigns and partnerships trying to contact these communities and seniors who are difficult to reach. Each year there are recipients who, through their tax returns, confirm their eligibility, and they are automatically renewed.

It is an undertaking. It will be extensive. We welcome any suggestions about where there are perhaps some gaps that we should be aware of, and we will certainly try to help so that the seniors are duly served.

Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to say a few words on this motion. It is a very important motion that calls upon Parliament to address some issues that have been neglected for a very long time.

Seniors' issues are very important and we should all be supportive of policies that are directed toward seniors. If we are lucky enough and if we live long enough, all of us without exception will become seniors. Some of us in this House are already seniors. It is inevitable that we will all find ourselves in that position. In addition, of course, we have to be very respectful and very caring of the people who have gone before us in building our communities, building our society, and making their own unique contribution to the betterment of all.

The motion covers a very wide range of issues. It talks about creating a seniors charter so that the rights of every senior would be enshrined to ensure they receive adequate support in a number of areas. The member mentioned a number of areas in her motion that are very important to seniors, such as income security, indexed pensions, affordable housing, wellness through health promotion, dental care, palliative care, pharmacare, and affordable recreation. These are all important issues for seniors generally, and in enshrining all of these and in developing these programs, seniors themselves would have the opportunity to have input.

As I said, all of us without exception can look at this kind of list and say that we support these measures because they are very laudable goals that should be pursued on behalf of seniors. I am particularly pleased with some of the initiatives that the government has already taken on a number of these issues.

As a government, we realize the dilemma in which many seniors find themselves today. Many are on fixed incomes, but still the cost of living continues to go up. The cost of electricity is forever on the rise. The cost of home heating fuel is always going up. In these two particular areas, I think it would mean an awful lot to seniors who have to live on a fixed income if they could have some kind of guarantee that their electricity bill would be reasonable or that home heating fuel would not go up by 50%, 60% or 70%, as it has over the last couple of years. If these costs were to remain stable, it would mean an awful lot to the average senior.

Of course, today we have to talk about drugs and medical care for some seniors. The costs for these can be draining for an individual on a fixed income. Seniors very often have to go to family members to get help. That should not be happening in this day and age.

I believe that every now and then we have to assure seniors that certain government benefits are guaranteed and will always be guaranteed. I am talking about things like the Canada pension plan, old age security and the guaranteed income supplement. These are fundamental guarantees of income security in retirement years. We as a government have to assure seniors for their own mental well-being that we will not reduce these benefits in any way, shape or form. As a matter of fact, not only do we have to assure seniors that we will not reduce these benefits, but we have to give them some assurance that we will build on these benefits to ensure that seniors maintain a decent and respectable quality of life.

Business of Supply

•(1135)

I am encouraged that a move is afoot which would see the federal government working with the provinces to examine the possibility of allocating a portion of any future surpluses to the Quebec and Canada pension plans. What better way to allocate additional moneys than for government to put these surpluses into these plans?

Seniors were very much a part of creating the good times that we enjoy today. Why should they not be the recipients of these good times as well? After all, seniors have sacrificed to pay into the pension plans for their retirement years. As a result, they certainly deserve to keep a greater portion of their hard-earned money to put into additional disposable income.

That is why in its budget the government is helping seniors in what I feel is a variety of different ways. In the budget, the amount of pension income that can be deducted from income tax went from \$1,000 to \$2,000. About 2.7 million taxpayers will be affected positively by that measure. In addition, it is going to take about 85,000 pensioners off the tax rolls altogether. That is a positive step. Hopefully we can look forward to other measures along these lines when subsequent budgets are brought down.

Of course, we are all very much aware that the GST will be reduced by 1% effective July 1. There is a promise of a further 1% within a five year period. Albeit the average senior is not going to be able to bank too much money from that, but it will be a saving on every purchase that a senior makes.

All these measures mean savings for seniors, of course, but I really believe there is a measure the government is currently working on that would mean a great deal for seniors, an initiative that would truly send a message to the average senior and would reinforce our commitment to seniors. That is the establishment of a national seniors council.

I am aware that the government is working toward that goal. It would be a council made up of seniors and seniors' organizations. That body would have a mandate to advise government on the needs and concerns of seniors all across the country. In addition, of course, seniors would have the comfort of knowing they have their own organization that reports directly to government on issues that affect them.

I noticed in the motion that the member would like to see an ombudsman for seniors put in place, who would report annually to Parliament and make recommendations on issues related to seniors. I think that would be a very good idea. However, I believe that when we put in place a national seniors council, which the government is determined to do, this body would report on issues related to seniors and, although I do not know, it probably would negate the necessity for an ombudsman.

The opposition motion also talks about education and training for seniors with respect to programs for seniors and issues that affect seniors generally. Education and training are very important in raising the awareness of issues that affect seniors. For instance, I am aware that the federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for seniors, along with the RCMP, have produced a public education kit to help seniors' organizations raise the visibility of elder abuse. The whole issue of elder abuse is a very important issue. The

government provides about \$7 million in permanent annual funding for an initiative on elder abuse, which is good as well.

•(1140)

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was quite interested in what the hon. member had to say but I would point out that this is an issue that cannot wait for a next budget or a budget after that. This issue should have been addressed in the current government's budget but, quite clearly, it was not.

There is a real concern around the ability of seniors to afford their housing. In the budget that the governing party put together this spring there was one time money for affordable housing, money that, I must point out, was appropriated in 2005 because of the NDP Bill C-48 but nothing for the future. It clearly is a critical situation.

I have an e-mail from a woman in north Vancouver, Ann Roberts, who says that she needs affordable housing. The 1% reduction in the GST does nothing in terms of her purchasing power. She cannot afford to go to the dentist or buy some of the drugs she needs.

I was wondering if the member could address this problem in regard to budgeting and propose a solution in terms of affordable housing.

Mr. Norman Doyle: Mr. Speaker, affordable housing is very important. I assure my colleague that Canada's new government is taking meaningful action to address the need for affordable housing, including affordable housing for low income seniors. Our government's plan includes funding in the amount of \$1 billion. A note that I received today includes the amount of about \$1 billion for an affordable housing initiative. In collaboration with provincial, territorial and local partners, we are in the process of delivering on that initiative. Affordable housing is important and it needs to be addressed.

The member talked about health care and health care for seniors. Governments over the years have failed seniors in many ways and we are all aware of this. It has not always been upfront or noticeable, but we have failed seniors in many different ways. When we look back over the years, the reduction in the transfers to the provinces has had a tremendous impact on provincial budgets. We can also look at the fact that \$25 billion were cut from the health care budget over the years. I think it would be fair to say that seniors are the major recipients of health care and, therefore, when these programs are cut, it is bound to have a major impact upon seniors generally.

I could not agree more with the member. We do need to do more for seniors but we must be vigilant of health care transfers and so many different things.

Business of Supply

• (1145)

Mr. Blair Wilson (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, going through the budget and seeing how the Conservative government has dealt with seniors, the one thing that strikes me right away is the fact that the economic condition that Canada and the Government of Canada finds itself in is one of after 10 years of prosperity, the new government has incredible financial flexibility going forward. We have had record levels of debt being paid off, we have balanced budgets and we have surpluses.

What do we have with respect to seniors in this new budget? I do not think we have anything that is substantial. What we do have is an increase in the tax rate. For many low income Canadians, most of whom are low income seniors, the tax rate goes from 15% to 15.5%. Would the member not acknowledge that due to the increase in the lowest tax rate and a decrease in the personal exemption, we will have more and more Canadians on the tax rolls of this country, many of whom will be seniors? While the GST has been cut by 1%, the Conservatives are giving with pennies and taking away with dollars.

Will the hon. member tell the House exactly how many seniors will be put back on the tax rolls due to the Conservative government's increase in taxes?

Mr. Norman Doyle: Mr. Speaker, over the years the federal government's budgets have been balanced and, as a result of that, many good things have happened. It has not been all bad over the years. However, we must remember that the budget was often balanced on the backs of the provinces and on the backs of seniors.

When we look at the fact, as I mentioned a moment ago, that \$25 billion were cut from the health care budget over the years, seniors suffered tremendously because of that.

We need a commitment from government that we will continue to look at our budgets in terms of health care and in terms of helping seniors and that should be a priority for any government.

Hon. Raymond Chan (Richmond, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the motion presented today by the member for Hamilton Mountain highlights the true spirit of Canada, a nation bound together by the philosophy of inclusion, of care and of community outreach.

As the opposition critic for seniors, I feel that it is incredibly important that the concerns of Canada's aging population be addressed in Parliament. The fact is that Canada's senior population is growing. By 2021, seniors will form 18% of our population, which is an increase from the 12.5% in 2000. As a result, the critical issues for seniors, like income security, affordable housing, long term care facilities, health care, home care, self-development and a representative voice in Parliament, need to be addressed by the House and, most important, by the Conservative government.

It is shameful that the current Conservative government pretends to have the best interests of seniors at heart and yet it has dismantled the secretary of state for seniors. It is shocking that within the throne speech the Prime Minister summed up the Conservative Party's commitment to seniors in nine words, "It, [being the government], will work to improve the security of seniors".

The Conservative government's lack of commitment to Canada's seniors should not be a shock as budget 2006 contained only one

measure directed specifically to seniors, surprise, surprise: a tax break, the Conservative solution to everything.

I am proud to be a part of a long Liberal tradition of ensuring that innovative and effective programs that address the real needs of Canadians are implemented. In the 2006 Liberal platform, we proposed constructive and practical measures to help better the lives of seniors. The Liberal Party committed to a \$50 million investment to expand the new horizons program for seniors, a new mortgage equity access now for seniors program, an increase in the age limit for maturing registered pension plans and RRSP to 71 from 69, develop a pan-Canadian older workers strategy, and a \$1 billion investment over five years to develop a national care giving strategy.

Those proposed measures were in addition to a solid Liberal track record on seniors' issues including: the creation of a minister of state to give seniors a voice at the cabinet table; the creation of a national seniors secretariat; the implementation of the largest increase in Canadian history to the guaranteed income supplement; a federally funded home adaptation for a seniors independent program; expansion of the residential rehabilitation assistance program to enable the creation of secondary rental and garden suites, an affordable rental housing option for low income seniors; a new tax credit in the 2004 budget allowing family caregivers to claim medical and disability related expenses; the creation of the new employment insurance compassionate care benefit to pay up to a maximum of six weeks to a person who has to be absent from work to provide care or support to a gravely ill family member at risk of dying; the launch of the new horizons for seniors program; the stabilization of the health care system by transferring \$41.3 billion to the provinces to ensure Canadians, including seniors, have access to high quality health care regardless of their income; the creation of a new home care fund; and a commitment to develop a national pharmaceutical and catastrophic drug strategy.

• (1150)

The Liberal Party's approach to addressing seniors' evolving needs is broad-based and practical. This includes retirement income supports, with additional income support for low-income seniors, funding to support community-based projects that establish or strengthen networks and associations that keep seniors active in their communities, initiatives to help seniors stay longer in their homes, secure public health care and a new position of minister of state to ensure added attention to commitments made to seniors.

Because of 13 years of a Liberal government, fewer Canadian seniors now live in poverty. The fact is that the incidence of low income among Canadian seniors has dropped from a high of 11% in 1993 to an all-time low of 5.4% in 2004.

Business of Supply

The Liberal government made a difference. For example, the Liberal government was the architect of one of Canada's greatest achievements, a deliverable, effective and sustainable retirement income system. It was also the Liberal government that implemented the old age security program, the Canada pension plan and the guaranteed income supplement.

I am particularly proud of the success of the new horizons for seniors program. Last year I had the honour to announce federal funding for the Chimo Crisis Services for its reaching out to isolated seniors project, in Richmond, B.C. It was a prime example of the federal Liberal government's commitment to strengthening and building inclusive communities that promoted the active living, empowerment and dignity of seniors.

New horizons for seniors has proven to an extremely valuable program that promotes community-based activities that help seniors pursue an active lifestyle and contribute to their communities. It is projects like this that support broad national objectives and regional priorities through the inspiration and leadership of seniors in our local communities.

The new horizons for seniors program recognizes the need for investing in Canadians and illustrates a successful nation-building initiative. In response to an overwhelming interest in the program, the former Liberal government announced an increase in funding to the program. The overall program budget was increased to \$15 million in the 2005-06 budget and should reach \$25 million by 2007-08.

This is another Liberal initiative of which Canadians can be proud.

The motion to create a seniors charter and seniors advocate opens up the opportunity to discuss the important issues that are affecting Canada's growing seniors population. As well, the motion creates the opportunity to question the motivation and logic behind the NDP's support of the Conservative government's attacks on the Liberal Party and questions the reasons why they helped bring down the former Liberal government.

For all intents and purposes, it appears that the NDP has simply forgotten or ignored the succession of Liberal initiatives, policies and legislation that were implemented to better the lives of Canada's seniors.

The Liberal Party supports the notion of the creation of a seniors charter and seniors advocate because it resonates with the spirit and thrust of so many of our actions. The simple fact is that the motion gives an encompassing name to a succession of Liberal policies and legislations, a seniors charter. Furthermore, it calls upon the government to reinstate and define the responsibilities of the minister of state for seniors and the national senior secretariat under the seniors advocate designation.

The motion illustrates the NDP's sheer hypocrisy to help bring down the former Liberal government, one that was committed to investing in the betterment of the lives of all Canadians, including seniors.

• (1155)

The motion also highlights the deficiency in the Conservative government's meagre strategy for senior citizen-related issues. By

looking at each section contained in the motion, we can see exactly how the NDP is playing catch-up.

The motion calls for indexed income support for seniors, which it has been since 1973. In 2005-06, the Liberal government paid more than \$28.5 billion a year in old age supplements and guaranteed income supplement benefits. Both of these payments were indexed to inflation. Further, over the next two years, the GIS, the guaranteed income supplement, will be increased by \$2.7 billion, directly benefiting 1.6 million Canadian seniors.

The Liberal Party has responded to the evolving needs of seniors. On June 29, 2005, Bill C-43 was given royal assent and as a result, effective January 1, the GIS allowance and the allowance for the survivor increased by \$18 per month in the case of a single recipient and \$29 per month in the case of a couple.

Canada's seniors also receive more than \$2 billion a year in direct tax credits such as the age credit and the pension income credit. Also, the proposed tax reductions in budget 2005 for individuals and adjustments to our tax system benefit seniors. Budget 2005 increased the amount of income that all Canadians could earn without paying federal income tax to \$10,000. This will remove 240,000 seniors from the tax rolls.

Unfortunately, the Conservative government's rollback of the income tax reduction to offset the costs of the GST reduction has nullified most of these income tax gains. The Liberal Party has worked to address the changing financial needs of seniors and designed provisions to adjust the income support programs to reflect these needs.

The motion calls for affordable, secure and accessible housing. Again, the NDP is playing catch-up. The former Liberal government committed significant resources toward affordable housing. The previous Liberal government spent approximately \$2 billion per year, through the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, in support of 636,000 affordable housing units. We also committed an additional \$2 billion for homelessness and affordable housing in the 2006-07 budget. Under the affordable housing initiative, rent supplement programs were set up for those who were eligible for funding from the federal government. The home adaptations for seniors' independence program helped low income seniors stay longer in their homes.

Furthermore, a Liberal government was committed to investing an additional \$1.5 billion over the next four years through the Canadian housing framework currently being developed. Unfortunately, many of the Liberal initiatives were cut short by the NDP and Conservative Party's political manoeuvring to the detriment of Canadians.

To address high energy prices, the Liberal government introduced the energy cost benefit to provide direct financial assistance to more than three million low income seniors and low income families with children. Senior couples, where both spouses were eligible for the GIS, would receive an extra \$250, while single seniors were entitled to the GIS would receive \$125. In addition to being available to low income individuals aged 65 and older, the energy cost benefit was also available to those aged 60 to 64 who were entitled to receive the allowance payment or allowance for survivor programs.

Business of Supply

Again the Liberal Party has worked for Canadians to help bring more affordable and accessible housing to Canadians and Canada's seniors.

The motion calls for a secure public health care system. Once again, the NDP is playing catch-up. Health care is one of the top priorities, if not the top priority, of the Liberal Party.

● (1200)

On September 16, 2004, the Government of Canada and first ministers signed an agreement on a 10 year plan to strengthen health care. The 10 year health care plan showed the Liberal government was committed to transferring \$41.3 billion to the provinces to strengthen and support our universal health care system. The Liberal Party of Canada is committed to ensuring that all Canadians have access to quality, affordable health care regardless of income.

In addition, the Liberal government created a new employment insurance benefit. The compassionate care program allows family members to take time off work to provide care for seriously ill loved ones, without suffering sudden income or job loss. Again, the Liberal Party has worked for Canadian seniors and delivered a sustainable and secure investment to Canada's publicly funded care system.

The motion called for seniors' self-development. Again, the NDP is not calling for anything that the Liberal government has not already provided for seniors.

In October 2004 the Liberal government launched its promised new horizons for seniors program. Under the program, funding is provided for projects that establish strengthened networks and associations that keep seniors active in their communities and reach out to vulnerable seniors. Budget 2005 doubled annual funding for the new horizons for seniors program from \$10 million to \$25 million over the next two years.

Budget 2005 also provided \$13 million over five years to establish a new national seniors secretariat that would serve as a focal point for our efforts to address the challenges facing seniors. Again, unfortunately, the Conservative government has cancelled this program and replaced it with nothing.

The Liberal Party has addressed all the elements of the NDP motion and the needs of Canada's seniors. At this point, this motion begins to beg the question. If the NDP is so committed to the needs of Canada's aging population, why did it help bring down a government that was actively involved in bettering the lives of seniors?

If we take a look at each of the elements of the NDP's motion, indexing GIS and OAS, affordable housing, health care, self-development and a representative voice in Parliament for seniors, they reflect a long-standing Liberal policy. The motion reflects the long-standing Liberal commitment to Canadians, to seniors and to innovative investments for the long term sustainability of Canada.

The NDP is playing catch-up to existing and, unfortunately, recently abolished Liberal policies with regard to Canadian seniors. Why is it proposing initiatives that the government has already developed? The charter appears to be an ill-conceived attempt to

hide the simple fact that the party has no real policies to offer to Canadian seniors, just a renaming of Liberal policies.

● (1205)

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened very carefully to my colleague from Richmond, who comes from the same province as I do. I am astounded to hear him today indicate that there is no additional help needed for seniors. It is certainly not the message I get in New Westminster—Coquitlam from the seniors in my community or from the seniors in British Columbia.

I remind the member that it was not the New Democratic Party that defeated his government. It was the people of Canada who defeated his government.

Is my colleague is aware of the Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations of British Columbia? It has been serving seniors in B.C. for more than 50 years. It is a coalition of more than 40 seniors' organizations and represents more than 40,000 senior citizens in British Columbia. Today, on World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, COSCO is sponsoring a gears in motion senior abuse awareness conference today in Vancouver.

Is the member for Richmond aware that COSCO has been calling for a number of years, lobbying the previous government and the present government, for the protection and preservation of our publicly funded universally accessible health care system? The member for Richmond does not seem to be aware that seniors are asking for this.

They have been asking for increases in GIS as one measure that would improve the status of older women who are living in poverty. They have been asking for federal funding for home support programs. They have been asking for a national pharmacare program, a senior housing programs and for financial support for seniors' organizations.

Does the member for Richmond support the goals of COSCO in British Columbia? Will he put on record that he does and that he understands that seniors need improvements in their day to day living?

Hon. Raymond Chan: Mr. Speaker, I never said there should not be any more improvements toward supporting our seniors in this country. As I mentioned in my speech, the Liberal government made a tremendous amount of progress over the years.

Business of Supply

Had it not been for the NDP deal with the Conservatives last November, many more things could have been done. There would have been 10 federal and provincial agencies which would have provided more than \$5 billion for the creation of thousands of new child care programs. There would have been \$2 billion to fight climate change. There would have been a fully funded Kelowna accord with \$5.1 billion to look after our aboriginal people. There would have been \$3.5 billion for workplace training. To ease the burden of tuition, \$2.7 billion in student aid would have been provided. To push for energy efficiency in Canadian homes, there would have been \$1.8 billion. There would have been a lower personal tax rate and a higher personal income tax exemption. There would have been 200,000 fewer people on the tax rolls.

We could have worked together on all of those things for our seniors and other needy people in our communities, but the NDP decided on a coalition with the Conservative Party which brought down the Liberal government last November.

• (1210)

[Translation]

Mr. Guy André (Berthier—Maskinongé, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened as my colleague gave his speech. As we know, from 1993 to 2001, the Liberal-led government trampled on the rights of Canadian seniors and deprived them of a total of nearly \$3.2 billion in income. In Quebec, at least \$800 million was taken, or should I say stolen, from the neediest seniors in our society. Seniors who receive the guaranteed income supplement do so because they do not have sufficient income to meet all their needs.

My colleague talked a bit about this problem. I would like to hear what he has to say now that he is in opposition. What is his position on the retroactive payment that the Bloc Québécois called for in the bills it introduced during the 38th Parliament? He seems very concerned about seniors. What is his position now? Is he prepared to support motions for full retroactivity for seniors who were deprived of the guaranteed income supplement and whose rights were trampled on by his government?

[English]

Hon. Raymond Chan: Mr. Speaker, we have to go back to 1993 when the Liberal government of the day inherited a huge financial burden. The country had a \$40 billion deficit. We had to tighten our belts to deal with the deficit. Our hands were tied and that was why we could not do anything for our seniors.

One of the first things we did after we balanced the budget was to fix the CPP system to ensure that it would be sustainable. After that we indexed the GIS to make sure our seniors were looked after.

I would be totally supportive of the retroactive proposal that my colleague talked about. One thing that is for sure is the Liberal government implemented many programs to look after seniors and the health care for all Canadians.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I must confess to being a little confused. If the Liberals were so wonderful all those years, how could anybody have thrown them out of office on January 23?

The Liberal government repeatedly threatened to do away with the planned increase in the GIS leading up to the election. It was the

former Liberal finance minister who threw the income trust sector into chaos undermining seniors' retirement savings. It was the same finance minister whose senior aide attacked a representative of CARP, the Canadian Association of Retired Persons, by calling him old and confused.

I would like to ask my hon. colleague, were seniors old and confused when they helped to throw out his government, or were they showing the wisdom of their years in opting for a change?

Hon. Raymond Chan: Mr. Speaker, the reason Canada has all these compassionate programs and we have created these values that look after our youth, our children, as well as our seniors is that Canadians kept the Liberals in government for 30 out of the last 40 years.

The problem is highlighted by a newspaper report, the headline of which reads, "Compassionate care goes on Tories' back burner". The Conservatives quietly put on ice the compassionate care benefit program under the employment insurance program which allowed people to take time off and provide palliative care for family members. It is the Tories who have no compassion at all. The Conservatives stopped that program, a mere \$700,000 a year, which was a 10% increase in that program. Shame on them.

• (1215)

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the repetition that comes from the member on the opposite side never ceases to amaze me. During the election campaign I ran against the former government House leader, a member of the Liberal Party. Seniors in Hamilton East—Stoney Creek told me quite clearly that 24% of them were living in poverty thanks to the magnificent job of the former Liberal Party.

I will say the same thing to the member as I said to the former prime minister, that it was not the NDP that gave his government the boot; it was the people of Canada.

Hon. Raymond Chan: Mr. Speaker, for 30 out of last 40 years when the Liberal Party was in power, the Liberals implemented many universal programs to look after seniors, children and those in need in Canada.

The problem was the NDP promised to bring down the Liberal government and promised all these things for seniors. Yet the leader of the NDP, even though the throne speech contained merely one line about seniors, claimed that he was optimistic. There was nothing at all for seniors in the budget. There was only one thing, a tax cut. This is no surprise at all from the Conservatives whose policy is that tax cuts will solve all the problems in the world.

This is what the NDP promised to Canada's seniors and in bringing down the Liberal government, what the seniors got was a mere tax cut. It is amazing that the NDP would think that would solve all the problems that seniors have in Canada.

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my speaking time with my colleague from Beauharnois—Salaberry.

Business of Supply

How great. How wonderful. In all the time I have been here this morning and since the debate on the NDP motion started, we have been hearing about the great things the Liberal Party did previously and what the Conservative Party will be doing now. This was all expressed with great conviction. Earlier, we heard our colleague from the Liberal Party say if this and if that. “If we had not been defeated. If you had not done that. If we did this”. There is a saying that if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride. The reality is that the previous government took enough public funds away from people, from taxpayers to cause the sponsorship scandal. Starting in 1994, it made cuts in transfers to the provinces, despite the fact that these were essential to provide services for seniors and everyone else in Quebec and Canada. It has cut everywhere, and now it wants to pass itself off as a champion of seniors.

As for the current government, it lacks the commitment needed to fully recognize seniors. That is the reality. That having been said, I did not rise in the House today to address that, but rather the motion of the New Democratic Party, which, I must say, has got me baffled. It is more like a rambling saga than anything else. For one thing, I find it deplorable that we are once again presented with a motion which, for the most part, contravenes the principle of respecting provincial jurisdictions. While the intention is worthwhile—I admit that it is, I recognize that—once again, this is showing that the New Democratic Party does not understand how important the issues relating to the respect of provincial jurisdictions are.

Instead, the NDP should be addressing issues directly related to federal jurisdiction, such as the guaranteed income supplement, and demanding that it be integrated into the tax return. That way, every eligible person would automatically qualify. They could also have demanded full retroactivity, which the government should grant to people who qualified for the program but never received anything because they were not well informed. They could also have demanded immediate implementation of POWA, the program for older worker adjustment, which was introduced by the Bloc Québécois and passed unanimously last June 9, right here in this House. Instead, in its motion, the NDP is asking us to allow even more crass and insidious meddling on the part of the government in areas of provincial jurisdiction: health, education and recreation.

During the summer recess, I would invite NDP members to find out everything that is already being done in Quebec by and for seniors, because they do not seem to know anything about it. In this, as in many other areas, Quebec is innovative and has taken the lead.

Back in 1992—we did not wait for the federal government or the UN to recognize the importance of the contribution seniors make—we established the Quebec seniors council. The council advises the minister on planning, implementing and coordinating government policies, as well as on programs and services for seniors, and recommends to the minister the implementation of programs and services designed to prevent or correct abusive situations where seniors are victims. Clearly, we do not need the federal government to do this. We are already doing what must be done.

This council is at the origin of the regional round tables of organizations that represent seniors. Also, thanks to its support in many regions, we have set up DIRA, which assists elderly victims of abuse or neglect, the Rose d'Or program, created by the FADOQ, which evaluates seniors' residences, and various other programs. We

also have the CLSCs, as my colleague was saying earlier. These are local community services centres. I do not think they exist elsewhere. Only in Quebec do we have this CLSC formula to meet the needs of citizens. This is unique to Quebec. Information programs are offered there on the dangers of falls in the home, and education and prevention services on abuse of medication. In collaboration with Kino-Québec, adapted exercise workshops are offered in the residences; this is called Vie active. There are also medical consulting, psychological support and community organization services.

• (1220)

And that is not all. Quebec has all kinds of community organizations that enable seniors to continue to be active, to pass on their knowledge and to share their values.

Today I would like to talk about one of these organizations, the Maison des grands-parents de Laval. Since I was one of the founders of this program, I am very familiar with the reasons why we set it up. We wanted to encourage the passing on of values and closer relations between seniors and other generations. In that we have been a great success.

The Maison des grands-parents de Laval has been in existence for five years now. Over those years, we have managed to establish closer contact with a younger clientele, to engage in activities with them and work in collaboration with various practitioners. We work in the schools, where we have programs and projects in which anonymous children write letters to anonymous seniors. These seniors are like secret grandparents, who in their letters can explain to the young people everything that is not going right in their lives. This program is greatly appreciated in the schools. Almost all the elementary schools in Laval are now participating in this program. What is more, the seniors distribute the mail: they go to pick up the letters and take them back. A team of psychologists is also working on identifying the particular problems of certain children, so that they can get immediate help.

In addition to this program, we have various others. For example, grandmothers who knit show children how to knit. Believe it or not, these children like to learn knitting, which is a lost art.

Some people who have left the Maison des grands-parents de Laval recently took part in an exceptional project, in collaboration with the Laval youth protection branch. One grandmother decided that she would make little comfort toys for the youth protection children and the children who are in a reception centre, and have none of their own things. These children go from one centre to another, and have nothing to attach themselves to, no roots. This grandmother started the project with another grandmother. The first toys for the children were left at the youth protection branch a few weeks ago. Some children from the centres were there at the time.

Each comfort toy has a little badge on which the words “Just for you” are embroidered. Each one comes with a little knitted cat or a little knitted doll.

Business of Supply

I am telling you this to make you realize that seniors have much to offer, to do and to accomplish. They have not retired from life. They deserve much more than just suppositions and empty promises. We should really be looking after them. Provincial programs, not federal programs, are needed. To that end, the provinces need new money, additional money. This money is slow in coming, as is money for the Kyoto protocol, for greenhouse gas emissions.

Quebec deserves this money because it is taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It also deserves money for programs it establishes for seniors. Quebec deserves this money because it is doing different things in the health field. Quebec is different. I do not deny that the other provinces are also different. We are all unique and we should recognize this. We should not create a single program for things that are very individualized. I do not know if people eat the same things everywhere in Canada, nor do I know if people engage in the same activities everywhere in Canada. But I do know that Quebec looks after its seniors. I also know that to continue to look after them and to enable them to live a rich and active life, there must be money to help them.

Unfortunately, I must vote against the New Democratic Party motion, not because I do not believe in its ideas, but simply because its ideas are not appropriate in this context.

• (1225)

Ms. Paule Brunelle (Trois-Rivières, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the hon. member for Laval on her passionate speech. It is easy to see that her broad experience with this issue is a major asset to this House.

It is quite surprising in this debate that they want global solutions when local services provide the best answer. I think that is what my colleague from Laval was trying to say when she talked about the need to be close to seniors to be well informed of their needs and expectations.

Rather than try to create new interferences and new tools, let us look at existing programs such as the Program for Older Worker Adjustment (POWA), and providing retroactivity for the guaranteed income supplement.

I would like the hon. member for Laval to continue to illustrate this need for the federal government to invest in programs. We want unconditional money transfers and that is certainly not what this motion is proposing.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate, but true. This motion could have done a lot of good for seniors in Quebec and Canada.

We could have talked simply about adapting services to seniors in various federal government programs, like Canada Post, which is now eliminating delivery to some rural routes. Seniors sometimes have to travel 5 or 10 miles to get their mail. There is also the example of the Canada Revenue Agency and the matter of pensions. When you call the department, sometimes you have to wait three hours before you can talk to someone—if you are lucky.

Nonetheless, I will remind my colleagues from the New Democratic Party that if they truly want to help seniors, they should support the requests of the Bloc Québécois on resolving the fiscal

imbalance, on adequate transfers for provincial responsibilities, on the guaranteed income supplement and on POWA.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it was interesting to hear the Bloc's perspective of saying that this intervenes on Quebec's jurisdiction. Previously in the House we had a vote where the New Democrats supported a Bloc motion on an issue related to oil and gas pricing and that issue was actually a provincial issue. One of the monitoring issues that we were looking at is being done in other provinces. In fact, four provincial governments have special legislation to regulate the price of gasoline.

How is it that Bloc members can conveniently pick things which they say are under Quebec's jurisdiction, while at the same time propose motions which have provincial jurisdiction and vote for them in this chamber? There is a direct correlation with the price of gasoline and the things that we actually pushed through our industry committee and the connection to the provinces of this country. Why is it good for that issue but not for this one?

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to inform my colleague that the motion he is talking about would in no way encroach upon provincial jurisdictions. This motion directly involved federal jurisdictions. The federal government is in a position to enforce it in order to get something done. We were not asking to bring down gas prices. Rather, we were asking the government to reinvest the money brought in by means of the motion passed. This motion had nothing to do with provincial jurisdictions. It came under the federal government's jurisdiction.

[*English*]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's enthusiasm in standing up for her constituents in Quebec. I, though, want to stand up with equal enthusiasm for my constituents of Hamilton Mountain but, frankly, seniors issues are issues right across the country.

I think the member would probably agree that seniors across the nation are far worse off now than they were 13 years ago. Access to health care and to home care have been diminished. We used to have a national housing strategy but we no longer have that. What about seniors' economic security through GIS, through indexing or the lack of indexing of OAS? People are suffering in our communities.

Business of Supply

We in the rest of Canada do have something to learn from Quebec. I wonder if the member could perhaps speak to her colleagues on the government side about the real inequality we have with respect to CPP as opposed to QPP. When seniors in the rest of Canada delay their applications for the Canada pension plan, they have 11 months of retroactivity to recover their pension money. This is not the government's money. This is money that went into the pension plan from employers and employees. Under the QPP system the retroactive period is five years.

I think Canadians and Canadian seniors deserve—

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I am sorry but the hon. member's time is up.

The hon. member for Laval.

Ms. Nicole Demers: Mr. Speaker, once again, my hon. colleague is right in many respects. Indeed, the government does not respect the programs in which citizens and employers invest, such as the EI program.

It is the same thing. The previous government slashed the program and the current government will not increase benefits or implement POWA. Moreover, I would point out that seniors everywhere in Canada and Quebec are underprivileged. Nevertheless, once again, the government in power and the previous government are to blame, for cutting transfers to the provinces, for not recognizing provincial jurisdictions and for failing to work with the provinces in order to help them offer seniors adequate, responsible programs.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak this morning on the motion introduced by the NDP. This motion proposes to rectify decades of underfunding of programs for seniors and, in the same breath, proposes a set of actions to achieve that.

Like my colleague, I am always surprised, not to say astounded, to see how centralizing an approach the NDP takes. Despite everything we have said, for the many years the Bloc Québécois has sat in this House, the NDP members do not seem to grasp, or simply do not want to acknowledge, that the provinces and the federal government have separate jurisdictions.

In the vote on the motion they are introducing today, they will surely be surprised to see that the Bloc Québécois is not supporting it. We will in fact not support this motion, laudable as its intentions may be. The point is not that seniors' issues do not interest us, quite the contrary; but this motion tramples on the jurisdiction of Quebec and the provinces, as my colleague who spoke before me demonstrated.

The interference in matters under our jurisdiction is so great and so flagrant that the Quebeckers who are watching us on television will be astounded. While we may live in an uncertain world, Quebeckers live with the certainty that the federal government does not meddle in its affairs, and once again, the NDP is encouraging interference and confusion.

We must remind our colleagues that seniors' issues, specifically when it comes to health care, education and income security, are not the business of this House. In fact, as one of my colleagues put it so

well last night, a number of aspects of the motion are very attractive, but unfortunately it has been introduced in the wrong legislature! Bizarrely, those aspects of seniors' issues that do fall under federal jurisdiction are missing from the motion. What explanation is there for the fact that, for example, it has nothing to say about the guaranteed income supplement, or the older worker adjustment program for people who are the victims of mass layoffs? And yet these are two programs that do fall under federal jurisdiction. This is incomprehensible!

I think that I have said before in this House, I worked for 20 years as a social worker with the seniors' office in the network of community and public services in Quebec before being elected as the member for the riding of Beauharnois—Salaberry.

I am going to use my speaking time to explain to my colleagues across the aisle, using some of the points in their motion, how Quebec provides services to its seniors. I hope that they will understand that Quebec and the provinces are in the best position to provide services to their seniors, and what they would be able to do if they had sufficient financial resources. It can never be said often enough: the money is in Ottawa and the needs are in Quebec and the provinces.

Let us take, for example, the aspect of the motion that proposes that a seniors' advocate be created. The motion is so finely detailed that it even describes what this advocate's job will be.

In Quebec, there is the Public Curator, whose primary responsibility is to protect people who are determined to be temporarily or permanently incapacitated. The Public Curator also steps in to protect vulnerable individuals against all forms of abuse: physical, psychological and financial. Here we have the first duplication of powers.

As my colleague mentioned, we also have the Conseil des aînés. This senior citizens' council advises the minister on planning, implementing and coordinating government policies, as well as programs and services designed to meet seniors' needs. It is important to understand that this council is also mandated to suggest that the minister set up specific programs to address elder abuse. The council even produces and distributes documentation and information about seniors and the services and benefits available to them.

In addition, every health administrative region in Quebec has its own seniors round table, with representation from various local and regional organizations that serve seniors. Most of the council members are themselves seniors, and they come from the public, community and private sectors. These round tables defend and take a stand on issues that relate to seniors and make recommendations to the council.

● (1235)

Each region of Quebec—there are 18 in all—has local community services centres, which we in Quebec call CLSCs. These are public bodies funded with Quebeckers' money. Each CLSC has local committees whose function is to screen seniors who are victims of abuse. Social workers support these seniors as they report their abusers or make the decision to do so.

Business of Supply

These local committees, once again, are made up of representatives of various groups: the police, hospitals, public seniors' homes, volunteer bureaus, in fact, all the local organizations that are concerned about elder abuse.

I am proud to describe what is done for seniors in Quebec and to talk about the quality of the services and initiatives in Quebec. If you will allow me, I will continue in the hope that my colleagues opposite will grasp what I am saying and will learn more so that they understand that Quebec does not want duplication and new structures. Quebec wants the financial resources that are sitting in Ottawa, in order to maintain and develop its own services and its own structures for seniors.

Quebec passed legislation that requires all public health and social services centres in our public system to make available to any user who so desires a quality-control officer or what could be called, in the jargon, a complaints commissioner. This person reports directly to a board and handles all complaints on a confidential basis. I myself worked for three years in an extended care facility for seniors and can say that this is a very important position that enables residents, most of whom are seniors, to express their complaints or dissatisfaction and request the necessary changes.

In addition, there are all the Associations québécoises de défense des droits de personnes retraitées et préretraitées, what we call the AQDR. Each looks after the interests of seniors in its region in regard to any matter at all and before any body. As a matter of fact, in my riding the AQDR, Valleyfield section, celebrated its 25th anniversary last Sunday with 400 seniors who are strong and proud to be members of this association.

The Government of Quebec also invests large amounts in its community network. I think that it is a model of its kind throughout Canada. The Quebec government realized that the best way to serve the citizens is to get down to the grassroots level. There is also a lot of funding in Quebec for an array voluntary community organizations that deal with seniors. These include the volunteer centres which provide a variety of services offered by volunteers supervised by professionals, thus enabling seniors to remain in their homes as long as possible. I could point as well to meals on wheels, informal caregiver groups, a long list. In Quebec and surely in other provinces, there are a lot of initiatives to help older people or anyone having a hard time.

I cannot finish my speech without saying more specifically how disappointed I am not to see any mention in this motion of the income support program for older workers who lost their jobs as a result of massive layoffs. Everyone knows that this program is close to my heart. In my riding, workers who are 55 years of age or more are in despair because they see the Conservative government abandoning them and failing to establish a program that would enable them to live their richly deserved retirement years with some dignity and respect. They are workers who are 55, 59 or 60 years of age and are finishing their days in a precarious financial state that is completely unacceptable.

In view of the Government of Canada's current financial condition, the Bloc Québécois, all the people in my riding and I myself fail to understand why it cannot take some simple, concrete

action to finally establish the program we are asking for. I am getting to the connection with the NDP motion.

• (1240)

We would have been very pleased if this had been included because it is a federal jurisdiction and it is important for all the seniors in Quebec and Canada.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this very important issue. I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek.

I would like to commend the member for Hamilton Mountain, who has put forth this motion, for the hard work she has done in her constituency on this issue.

It is important to put some context into today's debate because it is not a motion that has just come out of thin air. The motion has actually had consultations with Canadians from coast to coast to coast. Indeed, I introduced a motion in the House of Commons in the last session of Parliament on which the Liberals could have acted if they had wanted. It has been sitting on the books for a long time.

The member for Richmond talked about the fact that the Liberals had done so many things and gave us the sorry tale of blaming our party for their defeat and their problems. That is ironic because we did not even have enough votes necessary to prop them up, even if we wanted to. Second, Canadians were the ones who made that decision.

Interestingly, and the member obviously missed it, his former leader, the member for LaSalle—Émard, unprecedentedly begged on national television for some time to continue his government. There was only a three week difference between the election and the time for which he begged Canadians, so it is a moot point.

It is important to note that the Liberal government could have acted on the motion at that time. It did not do so, which is fine. We are here today and we have to focus on what we can do at this point in time.

The motion is very important as it puts seniors in the forefront. That did not happen in the budget. We did not see significant progress on seniors issues. I have gone through the budget. There are a couple of specific points, but they do not put the importance of the issue of seniors to the forefront.

When we started to engage Canadians in terms of the seniors charter of rights, it was done through consultations and not only through public meetings. New Democrats had meetings all across this country with constituents of all political backgrounds. We received thousands of petitions, emails and correspondence. We engaged seniors groups and organizations, and the context of the motion comes from that dialogue with Canadians.

Business of Supply

There are some suggestions about improvements to the motion. We, as New Democrats, are open to those and we are certainly willing to do so. However, the context of today's debate does not come from a decision made in a back room where something is thrown down on the table, it comes from the engagement of Canadians. It comes from talking with them and hearing their stories.

In Windsor West, when we had the national campaign to kick off the seniors charter, we engaged Canadians. We heard the stories of individuals whose incomes were affected. I heard the same stories from people in Vancouver and Winnipeg. For example, their disposable income is shrinking and contracting, based upon their rising costs. Whether it be issues over which we have little jurisdictional control or larger ones on which we have direct intervention, they expressed grave concern about the fact that all levels of government need to do some type of management and contribute more in terms of assisting seniors by presenting a policy because they are falling behind.

In Windsor West, for example, we heard everything about the energy crisis as an issue and the cost to people whose disposable income does not change based upon that. In Vancouver, for example, property evaluations were escalating so much that seniors were having to choose to leave their homes because they could not afford the property taxes. All those issues lead to the reasons why we have laid out a number of specific strategies to deal with this issue because it is on the minds of Canadians.

The Canadian Labour Congress polled Canadians about a year ago. The result was that 73% of seniors were concerned about their retirement and whether they were going to have enough income, and the effect on their health, wellness and livelihood. That is up 20% in one year. We know that on the public radar screen we have an aging population, and Canadians are concerned and they need to be engaged. That is what the motion does.

I am hoping that, because there was no type of examination of the issue in the budget, the Conservatives will support the motion. I am hoping, because the focus was so desperately needed in the last parliament, that the Liberals will support it. I hope the Bloc will think about it because it does provide for provincial programming and jurisdictional elements.

● (1245)

We are looking at strengthening, coordinating and giving seniors a voice. That is important to note because there is no overall coordinating voice.

We are looking at issues that we have identified as some of the highlights of this motion and they relate to: income security; secure, accessible and affordable housing; wellness; health care; and self-development and government services. All of those had particular points of interest.

When we heard from different people in the community, they had different types of experiences. Some were concerned, for example, that they had diabetes. They felt that they could not get the proper medical attention that was necessary or even testing. Some were only eligible for eye examinations once every two years when it should be done every year. These are things that cause problems later on in

their lives if we cannot get to the front end of ensuring wellness. That is actually a cost saving to society.

It is the same for dental issues. The motion focuses as well on some of the dental problems. We heard from people across the country that they were concerned about the fact that they did not have proper dental and hygiene care. That affects not only seniors but also our health care system, as we end up treating people for more significant problems down the road that could have been helped much sooner.

In the discussions that we had with seniors these things were important for them because they also lost their participation in society and became more isolated when they did not have those proper services. In particular, for physiotherapy, people are on waiting lists for a number of different procedures and operations, and second to that there is a cost to access therapy.

We heard from people in the inner cities who were on waiting lists for a long period of time for knee replacements for example and others in the rural areas who were prescribed physiotherapy, but did not have transportation to get to and from rehabilitation. That subsequently affects their lifestyle and their contribution to society.

That is important because we know from the escalating costs that seniors are becoming more active in society in terms of employment. Some do so, not only because they want to contribute and make some money but others do so because their pensions are not enough. Therefore, we have people retiring from a main occupation and moving into another part time job or seeking other types of employment. People are working longer and harder than before just to get by and then their services are falling to the wayside. These are some of the elements that we feel are important.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the Centre for Seniors in my riding for the good work that it has done and is one of the reasons we proposed our strategies. The Centre for Seniors is an organization that is an advocacy body in many respects. It is a gathering place. It provides services such as evaluations, training, social programs, as well camaraderie.

The New Democratic Party identified that the government does not really have an independent individual minister for seniors. That is why we believe that we need a seniors advocate. We need someone who is going to act in an ombudsman-type position who will champion in the House seniors issues, looking at everything from our federal programs to cross-coordination.

We need to analyse those programs, whether it be income supplements, health care programs or services, and how they are actually affecting people on the ground. Are we being effective, are we being engaging, and are we actually leading to real progress? That is something that the advocate can do.

We know that many Canadians are not even tapping into the programs and services for which they are eligible. That is an absolute crime. It is a shame. Hundreds of thousands of Canadians who are entitled to supplement payments from their seniors pensions are not aware of this or they do not have the capability. Whether it be language skills or reading and writing skills, they are not tapping into these types of funds.

The government will hunt us down for taxes. It will make sure it crawls through any space to go after people to pay their taxes. However, when it comes to assisting seniors to tap into the supplement programs which are supposed to be there for them, there is no effort by the government to find those individuals who are in need. One hundred thousand seniors as a bare minimum for just one program is not acceptable.

The ombudsman, in an advocate position, could be a leveraging tool to get into those cases which will benefit all of us.

• (1250)

In conclusion, I note that this motion is tabled by the NDP, but at the same time it is important to recognize that this comes from cross-country consultation with Canadians and seniors, who are supporting this position and supporting this motion here today.

Mr. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, obviously all members of the House care for seniors. There are dozens of seniors' homes in my riding of Edmonton Centre, all of which I have visited more than once, and there are indeed many people there who do need some assistance.

I will point out, as has been pointed out previously, that we are moving toward the establishment of a national seniors council, which will be made up of seniors and representatives of seniors' organizations, to advise the government on the very issues that my hon. friend has talked about.

I asked a question earlier of a previous NDP speaker as to whether the NDP has costed the program or not. I meant to ask what that number was, because I received the response that yes, the NDP has costed it. I would like to ask the hon. member that question. Given the fact that those members have costed it, would he share with us their estimate of that number?

• (1255)

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. Speaker, the costing is important. Not only is there an outlying cost that has to be funded, but there is also a return investment that we get from lowering other costs.

I will use the example of the dental hygiene in health care that we have proposed. The oral treatment that we are asking to move forward on has an eventual cost of around \$600 million annually for dental and hygiene care. Over time, that amount will diminish as the hygiene of individuals improves. There also will be cost savings later on when there are fewer problems related to hygiene and oral care.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate my NDP colleague's intervention on this interesting motion in support of Canadian seniors.

When the member spoke about some of the measures that were introduced in budget 2006, I thought of some of the initiatives that the government did bring forward with respect to doubling the pension income credit, an initiative that affects some 2.7 million pensioners and in fact will give them some additional bottom line. That is not to mention the reduction in the GST, which is going to get savings into the hands of the 30% or so of Canadians who do not even pay any income tax. Those savings, in addition to the transit pass measures, which I think will put another \$220 million in additional dollars in the pockets of Canadians by the 2007 year-end, are all positive measures.

Business of Supply

Notwithstanding the fact that the member's party did not support the budget, I wonder if the member would talk about how these measures in fact are tremendous benefits relative to what we have seen from past Liberal governments.

Mr. Brian Masse: Mr. Speaker, there is no doubt that those initiatives are important. I support them individually. I do not disagree that those initiatives will be benefits for seniors, but they pale in comparison to other tax cut measures and the other priorities in the budget.

As well, the issue of subsidies has not been addressed. The oil and gas sector will receive a subsidy of about \$1.5 billion from the budget. In fact, that sector will probably receive even more as some of the market budget levers are being changed as well.

There are some good things happening. Like every budget proposed in the House of Commons, this budget contains good things and bad things. If a member were to stand up here and say that a budget is 100% bad, there would be no credibility, because good things always come out of the budget process. Lobbying is done by ordinary Canadians as well as organizations and that leads to specific and different actions. These actions are happening and that is good. In the previous administration, we just saw policy announcements and those really do not affect people at all.

I hope the Conservative Party supports the motion. It would at least partially redress the gaping hole in that party's budget as it focuses most of the tax cuts on other issues and at the end of the day really has only a pittance for seniors. This motion is a start on that redress.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, not only must older Canadians be seen as the creative, active and valued members of our society that they are, but we as parliamentarians must ensure that we are doing everything we can to make that happen.

I am pleased to rise in this chamber today to join with the efforts of my colleagues in the NDP, which have been ongoing for many years. Almost seven years ago the United Nations celebrated the international year of the older person. At that time, a former member of our caucus, Michelle Dockrill, then seniors and pensions critic for the NDP, began work on a seniors charter. That work has been followed up by the members for Windsor West and Hamilton Mountain. I wish to take a moment to congratulate my colleagues on their efforts, their passion and their dedication to the very important issues that face the seniors of our country.

This motion has two key but separate components. First, it would provide guarantees through a charter to enshrine certain economic, social and cultural rights for seniors. Second, it would create the position of a seniors advocate, who would act as an ombudsman for older persons on policies and programs.

As the member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, I am pleased to actively support the NDP seniors charter. In the short time that I have been in office, I have heard many concerns from seniors in my community, concerns that would be addressed by this charter.

Business of Supply

Hamilton's Social Planning and Research Council's May 2005 report indicated that 24% of seniors in my community live in poverty. That is almost one in four seniors. That is not the worst news. This same report indicated that senior women over the age of 75 experience poverty at double the rate of men in the same age group. In my community of Hamilton, 36% of women over the age of 75 live in poverty. That is nothing less than shameful.

Our current income security system is a complex patchwork that does not cover all the holes. Hamilton is not alone. While the incomes of seniors in Canada have risen more than those of any other age group over the past 30 years, seniors still have, on average, lower incomes than people in most other age groups. Nationally, over 270,000 seniors, or almost 8%, live in poverty.

The time for action is now. Instead of a comprehensive plan like the one being presented here today, neither the Liberals, after 13 years in government, nor the Conservatives have put anything similar before the people of Canada. Instead of guaranteeing income security through protected pensions and indexed public income support for a reasonable state of economic welfare, the Conservatives campaigned on a commitment of no reduction to the three pillars of public income support, CPP, OAS and GIS. There was no increase and there was no indexing to inflation or the consumer price index—just no reduction. That is very short-sighted.

The Conservative promise is not worth much to the senior who is forced to go without food to pay the hydro bill or who cannot pay a telephone bill because the oil and home heating bills are so high. The Liberals, even after 13 years of government, were still campaigning in the last election on waiting for a report later this month before making a real promise or commitment on pharmacare or home care. For those seniors who are at risk by self-medicating or who are cutting pills in half or taking one dose instead of two daily as prescribed because they cannot afford the prescription, Liberal promises of pharmacare were cold comfort.

In my community of Hamilton, I have heard from many seniors who are injured workers. Many were forced into early retirement. Many live below the poverty line when they were used to much higher incomes. I have heard too many stories of the choices they have to make to go without food so they can pay for the medications that will allow them to get through the day.

Older Canadians have a right to income security, a right to accessible and affordable housing and a right to quality health care that includes primary, home, dental, palliative and geriatric care and pharmacare. The NDP is the only party to put forward a plan on how to achieve that. The NDP is also the only party talking about how to put forward plans for lifelong accessible and affordable recreation, education and training.

• (1300)

Lifelong learning opportunities is a very nice term that sometimes masks the problem many workers have in going back to school or retraining later in life when trying to secure employment after a layoff or downsizing in our changing economy. Making more loans available to our youth to become more indebted without addressing the rising costs of tuition for post-secondary education is not a solution to providing affordable and accessible education for our youth. More loans are also not a solution for retraining and education

for many older persons, who must undertake this for the purpose of work retraining or other self-development later in life.

Many Canadians in their forties and fifties are forced to seek student loans to access education and training. This means that more and more people approaching retirement or in retirement are accumulating student debt. It is difficult enough to live on fixed incomes. It is even more difficult when one has an OSAP payment to make.

Yet what does the Conservative government make available to people who are seeking education and retraining opportunities to better themselves and contribute to our economy? More loans, but no tuition reduction.

Education is not the right of youth alone. Affordable education must be for Canadians of all ages. With this motion, the NDP seeks to enshrine seniors' rights to lifelong access to education and retraining as part of a larger effort on ensuring access to affordable education.

The second and equally important part of the NDP's seniors motion that we are discussing here today is the creation of a federal seniors advocate. There are many government services and programs that are targeted specifically to seniors. Although many provinces have a cabinet minister directly responsible for seniors, there is no federal equivalent. We cannot in good faith simply enact a charter of rights without ensuring that there are mechanisms available to enforce those rights.

In the case of the NDP's seniors charter, we are proposing a seniors advocate. Ensuring access to services and programs requires a coordinated effort. For example, if we look at income support programs, we see that several ministries are involved and that none of the programs are automatic. Even though the federal government has access to reliable, annual, updated information regarding people's addresses, ages and incomes, it does not do a great job of making sure people know the programs and services are available to them.

Although applying for income support programs is reasonable, it is not reasonable to allow individuals to fall through the cracks because we do not do a good enough job of letting people know when they are eligible.

In my community of Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, I am conducting information sessions on the disability tax credit to ensure that all people in my riding know about the tax credits that are available to them. The first of several forums planned will take place on June 24. These are very important, because the government, even though it knows very few people actually receive the tax credit, does not ensure that everybody who might be eligible receives the information on it.

Business of Supply

Having an advocate for seniors, with oversight responsibilities assigned to a cabinet minister, would help coordinate federal programs directed at seniors. It would be an advocate for seniors who acts as an ombudsman, an advocate who reports annually to Parliament and examines policies and programs to ensure that there is one easy point of access for all seniors.

Although we do not have one, several other countries do. In fact, New Zealand created a minister of senior citizens in 2001. That office has many of the same reporting, monitoring and advocacy roles that today's motion suggests we adopt here in Canada.

During election campaigns, all politicians stand up and say how they are going to fight for seniors. Today in this House MPs from all parties have an opportunity to stand in the House and be counted. I hope all MPs in the House will remember their promises and support the NDP's seniors charter.

● (1305)

Mr. Steven Fletcher (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to speak to this motion today.

The federal government recognizes that seniors are valued members of Canadian society. This is why Canada is working with the provinces and territories to ensure that our health and social programs and systems are in place to respond to an aging population. To this end, our government is committed to the renewal of publicly funded health care services as set out in the 2004 health accord. This government is committed to ensuring that a publicly funded health care system meets the needs of all Canadians, including seniors.

This agreement on a shared agenda for renewal is based on a deep and broad consensus that has emerged from an ongoing dialogue among governments, patients, health care providers and Canadians. It represents the convergence of efforts to ensure that Canadians have a high quality, accessible health care system based on their need, not their ability to pay.

The accord addresses Canadians' priorities for sustaining and renewing the health care system and builds on and supports work already under way across the country.

Health care renewal and sustainability of the system is about fundamental structural reforms and the funding to implement them. These innovations are more important than ever given the public debate on the Supreme Court of Canada's Chaoulli decision. This decision highlighted the need for all governments to follow through on the first ministers' health care renewal commitments.

First ministers recommitted in the 2004 accord to improve access to primary health care and expand health care services and improve pharmaceuticals management and access. First ministers also agreed to achieve meaningful reductions in wait times, beginning in five priority areas. I would like to add that it was this government that committed to a wait time guarantee to ensure that patients get the care they deserve, especially after over a decade of mismanagement.

Primary health care is of great importance in the renewal of Canada's health care system. Major national and provincial health studies have recognized primary health care as an integral part to

achieving long term change and enhancing the sustainability of the health care system.

The health accord recommit first ministers to ensuring that they meet the objectives of 50% of Canadians, ensuring that by 2011 they have access to multi-disciplinary teams 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The accord builds on the commitment by accelerating efforts to set up multi-disciplinary teams, electronic health records and telehealth, all of which are key points to the sustainability of our health care system. The Conservative Party's health care guarantee will accelerate this process and enhance dramatically the health care of Canadians.

There is also a best practices network which will help bring forward reforms by encouraging the sharing of innovative practices and information barriers to progress and primary health care reform such as the scope of practice.

In addition to these initiatives, \$800 million in the primary health care transition fund was established in 2000 to accelerate improvements. The Conservative Party commitment to the health care guarantee and the creation of national strategies in cancer, heart disease and mental health will help all of us deal with health care concerns in a better way.

● (1310)

Home care can help reduce wait times by freeing up hospital space for patients with urgent or complex needs. Canadians have long said they want to remain in their homes for as long as possible when they are sick, recovering from an illness or injury, and during the final stages of life. Research shows that in many instances home based care is less expensive than care in an institution. For these reasons, where it makes sense to do so in terms of health outcomes and cost effectiveness, Canadians should be able to obtain the services they need in the appropriate setting.

I am a very big advocate of home care. My personal experience is that after my accident there was a strong push to institutionalize me. At the age of 23 that was definitely not the direction in which I wanted to go. When people find themselves in a similar situation, either in the prime of their life or at the end of their life or anytime during their life, in most cases home care is less expensive. More important, it is better for the individual, for the family and for the community. We have to ensure that the resources are in place to allow this to happen. I am pleased to say that the government has done that.

Business of Supply

In their accord, the first ministers agreed to provide first dollar coverage by 2006 for certain home care services based on assessed need. These include short term acute home care for two weeks, such as nursing and personal care, intravenous medications related to the discharge diagnosis, and case management; two week coverage for short term acute mental health and crisis response services; and end of life care for case management, nursing, palliative specific pharmaceuticals and personal care at the end of life. This means that no Canadian will have to pay out of pocket for these types of home care services.

The accord is a first step to a national approach for home care, ensuring that all Canadians have access to a common basket of home care services.

Prescription drugs are also a major issue. They can improve the outcomes when it comes to health care. Through advances in drug therapy, more and more Canadians are being treated at home close to their families and in the community.

Prescription drug expenditures are rising faster than any other component of the health care system. They cost more to the system than doctors' services. We need to deal with this issue. Part of the reason the Conservatives supported the 2004 agreement is that after 13 years of mismanagement, something needed to be done. Certainly the Conservatives will ensure that the appropriate action is taken.

Wait times continue to be the main concern of all Canadians. Reducing wait times and improving access is a key priority for this government. This is why the Conservative government brought forward the wait time guarantee. Under the previous government, wait times doubled. The Liberals cut \$25 billion from the health care system in 1995. That caused the health care crisis which we are now experiencing. This is why this government is committed to ensuring that we have community based services to shorten wait times and reduce the demands on our health care system.

●(1315)

I am pleased that due to this government's actions, Canadians will finally see significant improvements in the way people in need are dealt with. We will ensure that anyone, regardless of ability to pay, will have access to high quality, sustainable health care within the confines of the Canada Health Act and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Mr. Speaker, I am splitting my time with the member for Simcoe—Grey.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I certainly agree that health care is a huge issue for seniors right across this country. The focus on waiting lists was welcomed by seniors, but they want more than just the rhetoric of a commitment. They want the waiting lists go down. They want access to health care services when they need them.

What figures into that is in communities like mine on Hamilton Mountain, there is still a huge waiting list not just for surgeries, but actually for primary care physicians. There is a huge shortage of doctors in my community. Primary care physicians are needed or people cannot get the referrals for surgeons which the member just talked about.

Similarly with respect to home care, home care is not covered by the Canada Health Act. It ought to be. People should have access to home care. Not only does it allow seniors to live in their homes longer, it also means that acute care beds are freed up.

All of these things are integral to a holistic approach to health care. For the government to focus only on wait times for surgeries is not the solution. It is not what seniors are looking for. I wonder if the member could comment on what we are going to do to address in a meaningful way the shortage of doctors in our communities.

●(1320)

Mr. Steven Fletcher: Mr. Speaker, the issue of the shortage of family physicians is extremely important. This government is committed, along with the wait time guarantee, to concurrently work on increasing the capacity of our universities to graduate more doctors. We will work with the provinces to ensure that happens because education is a provincial responsibility.

We will also work with the colleges of family physicians in each province to facilitate the integration of international medical graduates. There are many people in this country who have the skills or are very close to having the skills necessary to practise medicine in Canada. There are also a substantial number of Canadian born, foreign trained medical graduates. We will help facilitate their integration.

There is another issue when training doctors. Not only do we have to increase the medical school spots, but also the residency spots. In order to become a doctor, students need to spend a certain amount of time in residency positions. There needs to be an increased capacity there as well. We are looking at creative ways to do that in urban and rural areas and in the north to ensure that Canadians will get in time the care and the doctors needed.

The 13 years of Liberal mismanagement and the deliberate cut of doctors graduating from universities during the Liberals' time in office caused a major problem which will take time to fix.

Ms. Helena Guergis (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to respond to the opposition motion currently before the House. I appreciate this opportunity to participate in today's dialogue.

The issue of seniors is one the government takes very seriously. I would like to focus my attention on the particular matter of seniors housing.

A paper recently released by Statistics Canada indicates that under some recent population projections there is a high likelihood that the number of seniors age 65 and over in Canada will be more numerous than the number of children we have by 2015. While the paper also noted that Canada's population is younger than in other G-8 groups of industrialized countries, it made clear that, like our G-8 partners, there is no disputing that seniors and senior-related issues will become an increasingly important part of the public policy agenda in the coming decade.

Business of Supply

Appropriate housing and access to the necessary support services can improve the quality of life for seniors. Living in their family home helps seniors maintain a sense of dignity and comfort as they age. It can also reduce public costs in other areas, such as health care.

The rapid aging of the Canadian population, along with new developments in health, social and economic conditions, has important implications for Canada's future housing requirements. Canada's housing requirements will need to reflect the rising number of seniors in the population who have specific housing needs due to their age.

In Canada the task of meeting the housing needs of seniors requires coordinated action by all levels of government, non-government organizations and others.

Our government is doing its part. We provide funding and we promote partnerships that will increase the supply of affordable housing. In addition, we help maintain the existing housing stock and support research that identifies new ways to ensure seniors' housing needs are met.

The recent federal budget provided for a one time investment of up to \$1.4 billion toward helping Canadians find safe, adequate and affordable housing in all provinces and territories. This investment will be made through the establishment of three housing trusts with the provinces and territories to invest in affordable housing. This provides a significant source of funding for those in need, including older Canadians.

As I mentioned previously, coordinated action among all levels of government is needed to address this issue.

Provincial governments play a pivotal role in the provision of housing and support services, including health care. Municipal governments, civil society groups, community associations and others participate in this continuum of support by helping with on the ground deliver and management of the housing and associated services.

The government is aware that the preference of many seniors and people with disabilities is to remain in their own homes for as long as possible, whether they rent it or own it. Many of them also want to stay in familiar communities where they have lived their entire lives, and they should be able to do so.

I would now like to provide more details to the House about how our government works through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, CMHC, our national housing agency, to meet the housing needs of seniors.

CMHC's renovation programs contribute to the quality of life of many seniors in this country. Often, a few simple renovations are all that is needed to ensure an existing home can accommodate the needs of an aging resident.

To help address these issues, CMHC is making an important contribution through its home adaptation for seniors independence program, also known as HASI. HASI helps homeowners and landowners pay for minor home adaptations. This means that seniors with low to moderate incomes can extend the time they are able to continue living in their own home.

Adapting a home so that it can accommodate the needs of an aging resident can involve a few relatively simple measures. They might include installing handrails, lever handles on doors or grab bars in the bathtub. These are all examples of the sorts of home adaptations made possible through HASI. These changes may seem minor but for the seniors who can benefit from them, they can make a real difference in the quality of their life.

Another CMHC program serving the needs of seniors is the flex housing initiative, which encourages innovation at the design and construction stage. Flex housing demonstrates how prudent planning and design and construction can allow homeowners to occupy their homes for longer periods of time and adapt to changing circumstances.

Secondary and garden suites can allow seniors to continue living independently. In rural Canada and in our smaller towns, such as my riding of Simcoe—Grey, these suites often make up a vital part of the supply of rental housing, especially where there is a lack of conventional rental housing.

● (1325)

When it comes to the housing needs of seniors, CMHC also provides assistance through its research program. A sizeable portion of CMHC's research has been dedicated toward studying and analyzing the housing needs of seniors. This includes, for example, guides such as planning housing and support services for seniors. These guides and information products provide practical and objective information to help seniors become fully informed about the choices available to them.

One current study at CMHC is examining the implications of Canada's aging population on housing and communities, an issue I alluded to earlier. Another is looking at trends in the housing needs and preferences of older Canadians, as well as the issue of how Canada's smaller communities and towns will be able to meet the needs of their residents as they get older.

Yet another research project is studying alternative forms of accommodations that can enable seniors to live close to their relatives and friends, if they should choose to do so. Through this option, seniors can benefit from the support and care of their loved ones. The CMHC research also examines alternative forms of housing tenure, such as life lease tenancies or resident funded retirement housing.

The CMHC has found many ways to disseminate this research by sharing its information with seniors, as well as their families, friends and other caregivers. The CMHC has also developed training seminars for architects, housing professionals and health professionals on designing homes for the growing number of aging consumers.

I began today by describing how seniors and senior-related policy issues will become more and more important in the years to come. As my remarks today demonstrate, this government is taking action to ensure seniors' housing needs are met. I thank the hon. member for raising this important matter today.

Mr. Speaker, I have consulted with the sponsor of the motion and she has agreed to the following amendment. I move:

Business of Supply

That the motion be amended by inserting after the words "government should" in the first line, the words "work with the provinces to".

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): It is my duty to inform hon. members that, pursuant to Standing Order 85, an amendment to an opposition motion may be moved only with the consent of the sponsor of the motion. Therefore, I ask the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain if she consents to this amendment being moved.

• (1330)

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in the interest of ensuring we get support from all sides of the House to push forward the agenda on seniors, I accept the amendment.

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade and the member for Simcoe—Grey who happens to share a part of Simcoe county with my particular riding. I know she is fully aware of the kinds of issues that are impacting seniors in our part of Ontario.

I wonder if she might share with the House some of the initiatives that have come to the forefront in her part of the world with respect to seniors' issues, especially as it relates to how seniors can work to protect their precious incomes that have been under so much pressure in recent years.

Ms. Helena Guergis: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if the hon. member knows this, as we have only recently come to know each other, but my history with seniors' issues goes back some 10 years. Having been involved in a policy process with the provincial party for many years and then, of course, as a member of Parliament and being appointed as the deputy critic for seniors' issues, I had the opportunity to not only meet with many seniors in my own riding, but with many seniors' organizations across the country.

For seniors housing has always been near the top of their list but also one issue that I hear quite often, as I know members in the House often do as well, is the issue of income splitting. Income splitting is where in the past one member of a traditional family household has decided to stay home to raise the children and take care of the home and the other spouse works and brings dollars into the household. If our seniors in particular were able to split that income, it would mean that they, on average, could have perhaps \$3,000 to \$4,000, even \$5,000 more within their households a year. This is substantial and something that we should all continue to work together on.

I would also like to give a special thanks to a gentleman by the name of Dan Braniff, who is with the Georgian Bay chapter of CARP in my riding of Simcoe—Grey. He has done some significant work on this.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member mentioned the CMHC. Does she have any concern that the recent budget allows private insurers to move into mortgage insurance? This definitely will not improve the affordability of mortgage insurance but rather cause CMHC's income and resources to decline, hence making affordable housing less possible to deliver.

Could the member also comment on the cuts to the EnerGuide program, which would negatively affect seniors?

Ms. Helena Guergis: Mr. Speaker, in conversations with the Minister of Finance it was my understanding that we would not be making changes and that we would continue to support the role the CMHC plays in providing insurance. Perhaps we can discuss this a little further later on, but my understanding is that there have not been any changes.

With respect to EnerGuide, those programs will continue to be in place for our seniors. I appreciate her question but my understanding is that we are continuing with those programs.

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I too appreciate the comments made by the parliamentary secretary for international trade. I have seen her passion over the last couple of years working on seniors' issues. As we live life we learn from others, and her involvement with seniors is an example to all of us.

Having elderly parents in their eighties, one finds out about the need for things like railings in the house and in washrooms. Her announcement, ensuring things like the CMHC and what is happening there, that they are helping in caring for seniors is encouraging.

We have heard a number of announcements from the government on seniors' issues. Could the member tell us whether seniors in general support the policy of the government? Are they happy with the direction in which we are heading? I am very positive on what we are doing but we want to hear from seniors and I would like input from her.

• (1335)

Ms. Helena Guergis: Mr. Speaker, in the conversations I have had with seniors, they are relatively pleased with the direction this government is taking. They are very pleased with the leadership that our Prime Minister is showing, not just with issues that pertain to seniors, but with the direction the entire country is taking as a whole.

I want to take this opportunity to go back to income splitting because it is something they are always talking about. The fact is that they do not have the dollars to continue with the cost of living increases. Income splitting is the right thing to do. It is not only a family friendly policy but it is the right thing to do in order to help our seniors with the ever-increasing costs that they have on a regular basis.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Discussions have taken place between all parties and I believe you would find consent for the following motion. I move:

That at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Hamilton Mountain, all questions necessary to dispose of this motion be deemed put, a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to the end of question period on Tuesday, June 20, 2006.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to move the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The House has heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Business of Supply

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

Mrs. Irene Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am sharing my time today with my colleague from Burnaby—Douglas.

Senior women face harsh realities upon retirement. The poverty rate for senior women is almost double the poverty rate for senior men. In particular, unattached senior women remain very vulnerable. They make up 60% of seniors living below the poverty line.

In 2003, according to a Government of Canada report, 154,000 unattached senior women lived in poverty. The guaranteed income supplement, or GIS, which is supposed to help, forces many seniors, especially those unattached, into poverty. In its own report, the Government of Canada states that in 2003 an unattached person only received old age security and GIS at a rate of \$12,031 a year. That is not enough money to live on, especially in our cities, which have an increasingly higher cost of living.

Alarming this same study maintains that many Canadians are not prepared for retirement. One-third of Canadians between the ages of 45 and 59 feel that they are not prepared financially for retirement. Furthermore, these concerns are more prevalent among women, those widowed, separated or divorced, recent immigrants, tenants, those without private pension coverage and not surprisingly, women with low wages.

How do our mothers and grandmothers end up living in poverty? There are many reasons. Women's unpaid work makes their risk of poverty higher and results in less access to private pensions. Older women tend to have lower incomes because they live longer, which leaves them at greater of using up their savings as time goes by.

Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable. Many over the age of 65, who have lived in Canada for less than 10 years, are without any income at all. Senior women receiving smaller pension incomes because of the wage difference between men and women are also at risk. Most divorced women do not claim a portion of their former spouse's pension even though they are entitled to it. Many retirement plans do not compensate for absences to raise children or look after sick relatives, absences are generally taken by women.

The ratio of male to female earnings tells a story of persistent systemic inequality between male and female incomes, whether from employment or pensions. Women are concentrated in low wage and part time jobs where there is rarely pensions available.

However, women who are able to work are still at a disadvantage. Women in our country work for about 75% of their potential working years, whereas men work 94%. Women consequently have less opportunity to save for their pension. More men than women save through RRSPs because men tend to make more money and are thus able to put more money aside for retirement.

It is very important to emphasize that these senior women living in poverty did not end up there the day they retired. It is the poverty in their youth or the near poverty that prevented them from setting aside money for retirement that is the real source, the genesis, of this problem.

With the last several years or Liberals cutting away at our social safety net, our working poor are at risk of being left in poverty when they retire. The Conservative government has not proposed anything that will truly help alleviate poverty in our country.

One of the key issues raised this week by the Canadian Labour Congress was that child care and specifically child care spaces were needed to help women stay in or get back into the workforce. This is critical for the senior women of the future. Safe, affordable, not for profit child care would provide them the opportunity to work and even pay into a pension, and thus enable them to retire with a pension that actually provides the resources they need and deserve.

We have all heard the Conservative government touting its true choice in child care, but it does not create a single child care space. It is obvious that the plan is to give a tax credit to those families rich enough to have one parent stay at home. These women, and, yes, they are mostly women, are not paid for their labour in raising a family.

I know many women would say that they do it out of love and do not want the money. However, the material point is that these women do not receive remuneration for their hard work and are not contributing to CPP. Therefore, they cannot collect any funds even though they have worked hard and faithfully to raise children. They too could be at risk in their retirement.

• (1340)

Senior women, whose spouses pass away, face a reduction in their partner's private pension and CPP, a deduction of 40%. This is problematic. Some women may be unable to afford to maintain their standard of living. Expenses for a single person are about 70% of the living expenses for a couple. This has the potential to drive women into poverty, as many senior women depend on their spouses' pension. It is an important part of an adequate income.

Many seniors do not realize what benefits are available to them. Women in particular are three times more likely than men to be late applying for CPP benefits. If they are late in their application, they are entitled to only 11 months of retroactive benefits. One should not be financially penalized for not having knowledge or access to information. In Quebec the retroactive grace period for benefits is five years. This makes far more sense if we are serious about care for seniors.

Equally important, the first step to ending poverty for senior men and women is access to safe, affordable housing. If seniors are spending the majority of their income on their place of residence, this leaves little money for food, medication and other necessities, thus forcing them into a cycle of poverty.

Business of Supply

In 2001 more than half of seniors living on their own in rental accommodations were paying more than 30% of their income for housing. In particular, single women were more likely to be living in these substandard conditions. If housing costs are tied to their income level and not to market value, then they have a chance to break out of poverty and live in dignity.

The cost of housing across Canada is on the rise. This year alone housing costs are up by 13%. With no new affordable housing money in the foreseeable future, many Canadians, especially senior Canadians, run the risk of becoming house poor. When housing costs are greater than 30% of their income, they are indeed condemned to live a life below the poverty line.

Previous Liberal governments allocated a substantial amount of money to the provinces and territories, about \$474 million for housing. Much of that money was not spent because it had to be matched by the provinces and territories. The agreements were also so convoluted that progress was nearly impossible. Clearly, the Liberals were not serious about creating affordable housing.

The decisions by the former federal government to stop funding of new social housing in 1993 and then to transfer the administration of most existing federal social housing programs to the provinces and territories in 1996 were also key factors in the steady growth of housing insecurity during the 1990s. Housing experts have drawn a direct connection between the withdrawal of the federal government from housing programs in the 1990s compounded by significant cuts in provincial housing budgets to the growing homelessness disaster and affordable housing crisis.

To further compound this, the present Conservative government made no commitment to affordable housing in its recent budget. In fact, Conservatives took the NDP Bill C-48 money and made a one-time payment. The intent of the NDP balanced budget was that the \$1.6 billion be available each year for affordable housing. At a time when our senior population is increasing, there will be no money to address the housing crisis many face.

Safe, affordable and accessible housing is the first step in ensuring that our seniors will live in dignity. Our senior women need access to pension dollars whether they work or stay at home to raise a family. Our mothers, our grandmothers, our fathers, our grandfathers, they all deserve this, the right to live in dignity, the right to escape poverty.

I encourage all parties to support the NDP motion that will ensure seniors across Canada have the respect that they so richly deserve.

● (1345)

Mr. Peter Van Loan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in my riding of York—Simcoe an enormous population of seniors live in places like Sutton-By-The-Lake and Sandycove Acres. I know I work very hard to represent their concerns. They have done a great deal in contributing to our country, and we have to pay them full respect.

The government has done that with measures in the budget, such as doubling the amount of pension income that is sheltered from income tax, from \$1,000 to \$2,000. That will benefit nearly 2.7 million taxpayers. As well, the cut in the GST will make a big difference. This is a tax that is paid disproportionately by seniors,

who are not necessarily paying a great deal of income tax, but who have to pay GST on everything. So they appreciate that.

I grew up in an environment situation where, while my mother worked, my grandmother raised me, to a large extent. Those kind of informal situations are very common in my riding. There are a lot of grandparents who assist with the raising of their children's children. That is the kind of situation our choice in child care policy is designed to assist. I know my mother, who was working in a very challenging situation, and my grandmother would have appreciated the assistance of a little additional income, the \$1,200 each for two children. It would have made a big difference.

Does the member not feel that this kind of benefit could help those seniors to allow them the opportunity, instead of institutional child care as an option, to contribute to their grandchildren's rearing, to be part of their family, to strengthen the family relationships and to allow them to continue to be strong contributing members of society they have always been?

I believe that is the case. I am interested to know if the member believes that.

Mrs. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, I know have met many of the seniors in Sandycove. I also know they are facing rising rents and an affordability problem in their living accommodation.

In response to his question, in a perfect world we would all have friends, neighbours and grandparents readily at hand to look after our children. That is not the reality of the 21st century. Families are mobile and many young families do not have relatives or friends in their neighbourhoods, so they cannot rely on others. They need and absolutely deserve to have access to safe, affordable, regulated child care so their children can be looked after properly and also experience the value of early childhood education.

This so-called \$1,200 gift is not a \$1,200 gift at all. If we look at the average moderate income earner, those families will be taxed on the \$1,200 and receive something like \$400 a year after taxes, after they have lost their child benefit supplement. It adds up to about \$1.19 a day. That does nothing for affordable child care, and it is not a choice.

● (1350)

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a great pleasure to take part in this debate today on seniors' issues. I want to thank my colleague from Hamilton Mountain for all the work she has done to bring this before the House today.

It is a very appropriate way to mark Elder Abuse Awareness Day, which we spoke of earlier today during the debate. We know this is one of the hidden problems that seniors face. Anything we can do to bring attention to the problem of elder abuse in our communities and in our families is very important.

Business of Supply

I also want to acknowledge my colleague from Windsor West and the work he has done over the years. As well, I want to acknowledge a former NDP member of Parliament, Michelle Dockrill, for the work she did in this area. I know the member for Windsor West, when he visited my constituency to talk about the seniors' charter idea of the NDP, also credited a former member of his staff, Katy Kydd Wright, for the work she did on this important issue. I want to acknowledge the staff contribution to this as well.

The idea of the motion today emerged out of a long series of consultations from coast to coast to coast in Canada, including one that I hosted with my colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster. The member for Windsor West came to a meeting in our constituencies to talk about the main issues facing seniors. The member for Burnaby—New Westminster and I had quite a number of seniors' organizations from our constituency represented at that meeting, groups like COSCO, the Council of Senior Citizens' Organizations, the Network of Burnaby Seniors, representatives from the great senior centres in the city of Burnaby, Confederation, Bonsor, Cameron and Edmonds and also people from organizations like the North Burnaby Retired Society.

They came together to talk about the key issues facing seniors and about ways that we could get those issues on the agenda of Parliament and on the agenda of the government. One of the main things we discussed, an idea to which they contributed, was the proposal for a seniors' charter. Meetings like that helped develop the idea before the House today.

I want to mention what is in the motion. The motion calls for:

(a) creating a Seniors Charter that recognizes older Canadians as creative, active and valued members of our society, and that this Charter shall enshrine the right of every senior living in Canada to the following: (i) income security, through protected pensions and indexed public income support that provides a reasonable state of economic welfare; (ii) housing, through secure accessible, and affordable housing; (iii) wellness, through health promotion and preventative care; (iv) health care, through secure, public, accessible, universal health care including primary care, dental care, homecare, palliative and geriatric care, and pharmacare; (v) self-development, through lifelong access to affordable recreation, education and training, (vi) government services, through timely access to all federal government services and programs, including family re-unification.

The folks in my riding, who got together to discuss this proposal, thought all of those were absolutely fundamental to the quality of life of seniors in Canada. I am proud they are before the House today as part of the seniors' charter idea.

We have also included something very important to ensure that seniors' rights, the charter principles, are promoted and that seniors can access those rights. We have done that by creating a seniors advocate. The seniors advocate, according to the motion, will have the following responsibilities:

(i) conduct public education and awareness initiatives on the rights of seniors; (ii) ensure that all new or revised policies and programs affecting seniors receive public input from older persons; (iii) require that all new policies and programs affecting seniors are announced with specific timelines for implementation; (iv) act as an Ombudsman for seniors with respect to all government services and programs making recommendations as appropriate and..publish and report annually to Parliament on government policies and programs affecting seniors, including the effectiveness of federal funding related to the needs of older persons.

The seniors advocate is an important measure of accountability. It would go hand in hand with the seniors charter. It will ensure that we

are not just giving lip service to these ideas, but that we are actually making progress and keeping the affairs, the concerns and the needs of seniors before Parliament. It is a very comprehensive motion in that regard and I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak in support of it.

● (1355)

Last weekend, six members of the NDP caucus, all of us from British Columbia, visited the riding of Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca. We had the opportunity to have a round table discussion with representatives of seniors organizations from Esquimalt and the greater Victoria area. I was lucky enough to be part of a small group that included Bel Paul, Faye Kemmis, Phil Lyons, Clara Halber and Janette George, all whom are very active as individuals or in seniors organizations in the greater Victoria area. We had an interesting discussion about the concerns and needs of seniors. The group mentioned the things they were working on to improve the lives of their fellow senior citizens.

Some of issues that came out of this group discussion were obvious ones. They are ones we hear about all the time, but have not done enough to address them. Health care was a key one. Emergency care was another. Concerns were brought up about privatized hospital services, the need for long term care beds, home care, pharmacare, preventative care, enforcement of the Canada Health Act and how we hold provinces accountable for the services provided and how federal money is spent. All these issues are included in the seniors charter.

The group also raised other issues such as seniors abuse and the difficulty seniors face in accessing information from the government, especially when it is only provided by phone. Pension income, especially women's pension income was raised. My colleague from London—Fanshawe addressed that. Housing for low income seniors was another issue raised by this group. They also mentioned the need for a guaranteed liveable income as opposed to a guaranteed annual income or some other measures. Concern was raised about Internet access for seniors, since it is such an important communication and organizing tool as well as a key source of information.

The group also talked about the need for advocates for seniors at the local level. An interesting project in the greater Victoria area is underway at the present time in this regard, which merits our attention.

Lots of important ideas came out of the meeting. I am proud to say that the motion before us would go some way toward ensuring that these issues are firmly on the government's agenda.

Statements by Members

I want to talk specifically about immigration issues and the concerns around family reunification. There is a huge backlog in parental and grandparental applications in our immigration system. Right now there are over 108,000 applications. We are violating a promise we made to immigrants when they came to Canada. We promised them that they could sponsor their parents and their grandparents to come to Canada. We are not doing very well on that promise. It is taking over 37 months to process an application. Even at the optimum, it will take five to six years to deal with the backlog, although some estimates have it up to 10 years. This is a major concern.

We have a serious problem facing us with respect to this backlog, and the Conservatives have not announced a plan on how to deal with it. They cancelled the pre-election promise that the Liberals made of \$700 million to be put toward the backlog. That would have reduced the backlog only slightly. Now we have a backlog of 108,000 parental and grandparental applications and almost 825,000 applications in the system. This is completely unacceptable to those families who take their obligations to their parents and grandparents seriously.

Family reunification has always been a hallmark of our immigration system. Unfortunately, the new minister is leaving that out of his overview of the immigration system. He did not talk about family reunification, when he listed the key aspects of our immigration program. This is a very serious issue. We have to be relentless in ensuring that family reunification and parental and grandparental reunification are priorities of the government.

The issue of the old age pension and new immigrants is also extremely important. New immigrants have to wait 10 years before they become eligible for the old age pension. This puts many of them at hardship. Even after they become Canadian citizens, they are still not eligible until that 10 year threshold. This is unacceptable and it needs to be addressed.

If British people immigrate to the United States, they get an upgraded pension from the British government. If they immigrate to Canada, they are not eligible for this. Canada has to pursue this with the British government to ensure that these people receive a liveable benefit to help them lead the quality of life we all want for them and expect for them.

Many issues need to be on the government agenda, particularly immigration. I suspect I might have a bit more time to conclude my remarks after question period.

● (1400)

The Speaker: The time allotted for the hon. member's remarks have expired. However, there will be five minutes for questions and comments.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

ELDER ABUSE

Mr. Art Hanger (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to stand here today in recognition of World Elder Abuse

Awareness Day. This is an opportunity to raise awareness of the mental and physical abuse and neglect to which an ever growing number of our seniors are subjected.

Too many seniors experience one or more forms of abuse or neglect at some point in their later years from someone on whom they trust or rely. The abuse of this trust leaves them with scars that can never heal.

It is a despicable crime, a crime against one of the most vulnerable groups in our society and a crime that we need to confront head on because it so often takes place in the hidden recesses of our communities' homes.

Canada's seniors deserve the utmost respect and they deserve to live out their retirement years in peace and dignity.

Our response to this offence is also critical. Together we, as Canadians, can strive to better appreciate the traumatic experiences that many of our seniors suffer at the hands of their abusers and to act to prevent it.

* * *

TOURISM WEEK

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Tourism Week in Canada is an opportunity to consider the many benefits tourism brings to our nation. The people in my riding, the most tourism dependent economy in Canada, certainly understand and appreciate those benefits.

The effects of the tourism industry impact every Yukoner and, indeed, every Canadian. For example, it is the largest private sector employer in my riding. Approximately 2,000 jobs are directly dependent on tourism. In fact, 80% of all Yukon private sector employees work for businesses that have some sort of tourism revenue.

Every June, many Yukoners and other Canadians celebrate Tourism Week, excellently coordinated nationally by the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, TIAC, and in Yukon by the Tourism Industry Association of Yukon.

I ask all hon. members to consider the value of tourism to their ridings. Tourism Week is a good time to do that. In fact, today and every day is a good time to celebrate what tourism means to Canada.

* * *

[Translation]

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, since 2002, we have noted a downward trend in jobs in the manufacturing sector. There have been some blips in the trend, but the situation has continued to deteriorate.

Just last month, 11,800 jobs were lost in Quebec, bringing the total to 31,900 in the past year.

In my riding of Beauharnois—Salaberry, over the last year and a half, in textiles alone, 700 jobs were lost with the shutdown of Huntingdon Mills and Clyne & Tinker. These closures are in addition to those of other factories, including Spixel de Beauharnois, which resulted in the loss of some 100 jobs.

To date, the most effective decision for boosting employment was the one made by the municipal authorities of Huntingdon to purchase the buildings no longer in use and convert them into industrial condos.

The Bloc Québécois demands that the federal government take immediate action to stop this loss of employment, which is slowly destroying our economy and lives.

* * *

[English]

PHILIPPINE HERITAGE WEEK

Ms. Judy Wasylcia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I pay tribute to Canadians of Philippine heritage from coast to coast to coast.

All over Canada, celebrations are taking place, as part of Philippine Heritage Week, to mark the 108th anniversary of Philippine independence. However, none will be more vibrant and exciting than the celebrating taking place in my riding of Winnipeg North.

Winnipeg was one of the first Canadian cities to open its arms to the Filipino community. I am proud to say their culture, heritage and food have all shaped the fabric of Winnipeg.

I have had the great fortune to know a good many members of the Filipino community and they are, without fail, loving, caring, vibrant and active members of our society. It is through them I learned the great joy that is lechon, lumpia and pansit.

Today is a time to say *salamat po* to Filipino Canadians and a time to remember that our strength as a nation comes from diversity and from the belief that we must never turn our backs on people in need.

As described in this year's theme, "Bayanihan", community spirit makes seemingly impossible feats possible through the power of unity and cooperation.

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● (1405)

MARY THOMAS

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a person of note in my constituency is Dr. Mary Thomas, a mother, grandmother, great grandmother and an elder of the Neskolith Band.

Dr. Thomas began her career as a First Nations Ambassador in 1970, when she founded the Central Okanagan Interior Friendship Society. Since that time, Dr. Mary Thomas has devoted her life to the preservation and teaching of her culture and language.

Dr. Thomas has received numerous awards over the years, including two honorary doctorates from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and the University of Victoria. She received the

Statements by Members

B.C. Museums Association Distinguished Person Award in 1989 and the Governor General's Award in 1992.

Dr. Thomas was the first native American to receive the Indigenous Conservationist of the Year Award from the Seacology Foundation. Dr. Thomas was awarded the Aboriginal Achievement Award of Canada.

At 87 years of age, Dr. Mary Thomas is actively forwarding her dream to build a Shuswap cultural centre that will contain much of her life work.

Dr. Mary Thomas is an inspiration to her people and a great Canadian.

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[Translation]

GOVERNOR GENERAL'S CARING CANADIAN AWARD

Mr. Bernard Patry (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to pay tribute today to William and Marion Grandin, and also Fay Bland, who are all from Dollard-des-Ormeaux and recipients of the Governor General's Caring Canadian Award. All three have carried out some exceptional projects in order to help children and young adults with intellectual disabilities from throughout Quebec.

These projects include the Outdoor Art Show created in 1959, the establishment of the John F. Kennedy school for children requiring special education, the creation of workshops, the creation of the Lakeshore Association for Retarded Citizens and the Lakeshore Vocational Projects Association, which restored hope to families, in addition to Apprentissage à la vie autonome/Towards Independent Living, a project designed for people over 40.

These are their achievements and these people deserve our recognition for never begrudging their time or effort to improve the situation of persons with disabilities.

We thank, Mr. and Mrs. Grandin, and we thank Ms. Bland.

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[English]

GRADUATING CLASSES OF 2006

Mr. Rob Moore (Fundy Royal, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in my riding of Fundy Royal there are over 1,000 students graduating from high school this spring. I rise today to recognize the product of their commitment to stay in school, study hard and to graduate.

Because we live in a prosperous land, we can expect that great things await these young people. Canada's new government is doing its part to make this a reality. In the recent budget, the government brought in measures to help graduating students face the cost of post-secondary education, including a tax credit on books, the exemption of scholarships and bursaries from income tax, and the expansion of the eligibility of middle income students to receive student loans.

The graduates of today are the leaders that will shape the Canada of tomorrow. I invite members to join me in congratulating the graduating classes of 2006. As parliamentarians, we wish every one of them the very best for the future.

Statements by Members

[Translation]

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Mr. Robert Vincent (Shefford, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the current government lacks consistency, in that it keeps saying one thing and then the opposite. On the one hand, the Conservatives are refusing to implement the decision of the Canadian International Trade Tribunal designed to protect the Quebec bicycle industry, presumably to prevent a price hike; on the other hand, they are also refusing to act on gasoline prices, to the detriment of a much larger number of consumers, in order to protect the interests of Alberta.

While raking up billions in profits, the oil sector is in the good graces of the Conservative government. Yet, the manufacturing sector is directly affected by skyrocketing energy prices and their impact on the value of the Canadian dollar.

Raleigh Canada, in my riding, and Procycle Group, in the industry minister's riding, are among the victims. These two leading bicycle manufacturers have spent thousands of dollars in legal fees to get the Canadian International Trade Tribunal to look into the matter. They won their case, but the government prefers not to act.

The government has to act; there are hundreds of jobs on the line.

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[English]

AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, recently I introduced a private member's bill that would designate the month of June as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis month. This is also known as ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. This bill would ensure that throughout Canada in each and every year the month June shall be officially known as ALS month.

Approximately 3,000 Canadians currently live with ALS. Two or three Canadians lose their battle to this devastating disease every day. I lost my father to this disease a few years ago, so I know how devastating this disease can be. With improved knowledge about ALS, health care providers and families can help those living with this disease live life more fully.

Volunteers and staff of the ALS Society participate in annual fundraising events, including Walk for ALS and Hike4ALS, to create public awareness about the disease and raise funds to find a cure. I urge all Canadians to wear a cornflower during the month of June in support of finding a cure for ALS.

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● (1410)

ELDER ABUSE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to announce that June 15 has been proclaimed World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. In my province of Prince Edward Island, across Canada and throughout the world this day is marked to raise awareness of the abuse and neglect of older adults which is largely under-recognized or treated as an unspoken problem.

Research indicates that public education campaigns like World Elder Abuse Awareness Day are vital for informing people in a

growing number of countries about elder abuse. The active involvement of all Canadians is central to its success. The overall objective is to lessen and eliminate elder abuse in societies around the world, an objective I am sure we all support.

I commend all individuals and organizations that have contributed to raising awareness of this important issue.

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CANADIAN FORCES SNOWBIRDS

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the citizens of Palliser, it is an honour for me to rise today to pay tribute to Canada's own Snowbirds, the pride of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, and to welcome them to Parliament.

As all Canadians know, the Snowbirds are a Canadian icon second to none. For 35 years they have symbolized excellence in our armed forces. As ambassadors for Canada around the world, their skill and precision flying exemplifies the best in Canadian aviation.

Yesterday members of Parliament and visitors to Ottawa received a special treat when the Snowbirds flew past Parliament Hill multiple times and buzzed the Peace Tower.

As someone who has had the good fortune to fly with the Snowbirds, I can say there is nothing that compares with the thrill of joining this team of professionals as they execute their manoeuvres.

On behalf of the people of Palliser and our government, I want to thank Snowbird 1 Commander Ian McLean and his entire team for representing our country. They make a tremendous contribution to Canada. I know I speak for everyone in Moose Jaw when I say they are a source of great pride to our community.

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SENIORS

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during the last election I spoke with thousands of seniors in my riding of Hamilton Centre. They told me they are concerned that seniors issues are being neglected, and they are right. In fact the Conservative budget actually raised taxes for many seniors while offering them fewer government services.

I am proud that today the NDP, led by my esteemed colleague from Hamilton Mountain, is offering parliamentarians an opportunity to help Canada's elder citizens.

The NDP seniors charter provides a fundamental recognition that older Canadians have a right to a fulfilling life complete with dignity and respect. We believe that seniors deserve income security, housing and lifelong access to affordable recreation, education and training, and that excellent health care, including dental and pharmacare, must be provided.

Statements by Members

Most important, we are calling for the creation of a seniors advocate to speak out on behalf of older citizens' rights. With more than 70,000 seniors in the Hamilton area, the NDP seniors charter responds to a critical need. I call on all members of the House to join with the NDP—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Beauséjour.

* * *

[*Translation*]

YVONNE LEBLANC

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to acknowledge the extraordinary contribution of an absolutely remarkable woman.

Yvonne Leblanc, from my parish of Grande-Digue, New-Brunswick, will be honoured and will be receiving a prestigious award from the Alliance des femmes de la francophonie canadienne.

The alliance could not have honoured a more deserving person. I have had the opportunity to see for myself the enormous compassion, extraordinary generosity and remarkable courage of Yvonne Leblanc.

A teacher by trade, Yvonne has dedicated her life to helping others. Often behind the scenes, she works to ensure that those in need can find support and assistance in small communities like Grande-Digue.

I salute the outstanding contribution that Yvonne, her husband and her extended family are making to Acadia, New Brunswick and Canada.

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MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Mrs. Carole Lavallée (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, our dollar has gained about 5% relative to the U.S. dollar in the past two months. This means that manufacturers in Quebec and Canada who export goods to the United States are finding themselves forced to lower their profit margins so they can stay competitive.

The latest figures from Statistics Canada show that deliveries dropped by 1.5% from March to April. Worse yet, this downward trend has shown up in three of the first four months of 2006.

These statistics confirm opinions expressed by Laurent Beaudoin, CEO of Bombardier, and Perrin Beatty, President of Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters.

Mr. Beaudoin said, and I quote, “If the Canadian dollar continues to gain ground, manufacturing companies that export will soon have almost no other choice but to increase the US dollar content of their business or move production to countries where costs will allow them to be more competitive”.

We must counteract repeated increases in the value of the dollar. The Bloc Québécois urges the Prime Minister to implement measures to support manufacturing employment.

●(1415)

[*English*]

CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL FUNDRAISING EVENT

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I recently had the privilege of attending a fundraising event here in Ottawa for two very worthy causes. There is a group of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians living here who formed a volunteer committee to raise funds for the Janeway Children's Hospital in St. John's and the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario here in Ottawa. The group felt it most appropriate that they would split the proceeds for the two children's hospitals in both their original and adopted homes.

The most recent event was an evening of fun, entertainment and food. I was pleased to see that my hon. colleagues as well as many other people in the House were able to attend. Members of the group informed me that their fundraising exceeded expectations. I encourage all members of the House and their staff to take part in their future events.

I want to congratulate the Newfoundland and Labrador Golf Classic Committee on a job well done. I encourage them to keep up their efforts.

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ELDER ABUSE

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I rise in the House on the occasion of World Elder Abuse Awareness Day to draw attention to this crime which is all too often overlooked. Elder abuse is a hidden crime in our society, a crime that affects our most vulnerable citizens, our seniors.

Elder abuse is generally thought of as a physical abuse but is often much more than that. Elder abuse is any act that harms a senior or jeopardizes his or her health and welfare. Elder abuse could come in the form of neglect or sexual, physiological, financial or physical abuse. It could take place in a home, a facility setting, or anywhere in the community.

The sad truth is that elder abuse is a crime that often goes unreported as victims fear the consequences or reprisals and have a feeling of shame.

I will be introducing a private member's bill in the House on the mandatory reporting of elder abuse. I hope that all of my colleagues across all party lines will support it. As parliamentarians we need to do whatever we can to stop this crime against our wisdom keepers.

This day, June 15, is meant to draw attention to elder abuse. I encourage all members of the House and indeed all Canadians to become more aware of this tragedy against Canadian seniors and to do whatever they can to help eradicate this crime.

*Oral Questions***ORAL QUESTIONS***[English]***SOFTWOOD LUMBER**

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister's enthusiasm for any softwood lumber deal which he and the trade minister have been trying to force on the provinces and the industry always seemed to us to be both misplaced and premature. Today the deal is clearly unravelling. Negotiations have stalled and it is unclear under what conditions they will resume.

Ironically, this delay is being greeted with relief by the producers because it will stop the government from trying to force a bad deal on the Canadian lumber industry.

Will the Prime Minister commit today that any deal he signs on softwood lumber will comply with the North American Free Trade Agreement and not serve to undermine it as the present terms of this deal clearly would be?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we have said for some time, I would advise the Leader of the Opposition not to get all his facts from newspaper speculation. The fact of the matter is that these are complex discussions to put in place the legal text and the running rights around the agreement in principle.

I will certainly commit that the final deal will reflect the agreement in principle. I certainly welcome that we finally have the support of the Liberal Party for NAFTA, which Conservatives brought to this country.

[Translation]

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, luckily we are here. While the Minister of International Trade claims that the agreement represents stability for our softwood lumber producers, the U.S. Department of Commerce is about to dramatically increase tariffs in order to force us to abandon our management practices of our own forests.

It is precisely this type of action that a real softwood lumber agreement should eliminate. Will the Prime Minister commit to rejecting an agreement that gives the Americans the last word on how we manage our own resources in our own country?

• (1420)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have already said several times, this agreement, by its very nature, aims to create stability for the industry and to protect our rules. It is the best option we have had with the United States in recent years.

Hon. Bill Graham (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during these negotiations, the U.S. Court of International Trade must reach a decision—soon—which, if it is in line with previous decisions, will confirm that our country respects its international commitments. In that event, the tariffs illegally collected by the Americans have to be paid back in full to Canadian producers.

I am asking the Prime Minister today if he will commit to not signing any agreement until the U.S. Court of International Trade renders a decision, in order to have greater clarity on the matter.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Quebec and Canadian industry supports this agreement because it is the best option that we have had with the Americans in recent years. This is why we are taking the time needed to conclude this agreement and draft the legal text.

[English]

But I can say once again, I do not think the Leader of the Opposition gets it.

The government has looked carefully at all the alternatives. This deal is clearly better to the only alternative that the Leader of the Opposition and his lawyer friends have to offer, and that is endless litigation in American courts. That is not the best way to go.

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*[Translation]***THE ENVIRONMENT**

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, following a request for access to information, we learned that no one at the Prime Minister's office, the Privy Council or the Minister of Environment's office communicated in writing with the Government of Quebec about implementing the Kyoto protocol. And yet, on May 2, the minister said in this House, and I quote, "[The provinces] will be very much a part of our made in Canada solution, Canadians will come first, and Quebec is a part of that plan."

Why did the minister mislead the House?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said before, the Liberals failed Canadians when it came to the environment. They are all show and no action. They chose rhetoric over performance. They left us with a legacy of failure.

Like the aspiring Liberal leadership candidate from Etobicoke—Lakeshore said this past weekend about his party, "We've done all the blah blah blah on the environment".

Canadians can rest assured that the government is not afraid to act.

[Translation]

Hon. John Godfrey (Don Valley West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am talking about Quebec. At the Privy Council Office, we were told that a thorough search had been done and that no document was found. At Environment Canada, no document exists on the relations between Ottawa and Quebec.

On the same day that Quebec tabled its own plan to achieve the objectives of the Kyoto protocol, how can Quebec be part of a Canadian plan to reduce greenhouse gases if there is no written communication between the two governments?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, more blah, blah, blah.

Oral Questions

We said we would help clean up the polluted harbour in Saint John's and we have. We said we would clean up the polluted drinking water of first nations and the—

The Speaker: If everybody keeps going blah, blah, blah, we cannot hear. We had better stick with other language and try to give questions and answers without the use of that kind of phrase.

The hon. Minister of the Environment has the floor to complete her answer.

Hon. Rona Ambrose: Mr. Speaker, let me remind the House, we said we would clean up the polluted harbour in Saint John and we have. We said we would clean up the polluted drinking water on first nations and the Minister of Indian Affairs took action and is fixing the problem.

We said we would develop a biofuel strategy and we are. We said we would invest in clean public transportation and we went even further by making the largest investment in clean public transportation in Canadian history, followed by the first ever incentive for two months of free public transit for people who take the bus.

We said we would clean up the air Canadians breathe and we have reduced—

• (1425)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

* * *

[Translation]

MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this morning I met with manufacturing sector and union representatives. We all agree that manufacturers are experiencing an unprecedented crisis. In Canada, over 149,000 jobs disappeared from this sector in 2005. Yet, the government persists with its laissez-faire philosophy.

The prevailing situation in the manufacturing sector requires concrete action by the government. How can the Prime Minister's only strategy be to lower taxes, a measure that benefits profitable industries but that does little for the manufacturing sector?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, lowering taxes is not our only approach to this problem. In our budget there are programs to improve training and flexibility of the labour force. We also have programs to encourage corporate research and development and several initiatives of this type. In addition, we are developing a program for older workers.

I again ask for the support of the Bloc Québécois for these budgetary measures.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the government knows full well that the difficulties experienced by the manufacturing industry at present are due in large part to higher oil prices and the rising dollar.

What concrete action does the Prime Minister plan on taking to help Quebec and Canadian manufacturers that are running out of time? Why not implement transitional measures such as those of the WTO? Other countries, such as the United States, are implementing them.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have just mentioned a number of measures implemented by this government. We are examining others. Problems in the manufacturing industry are not Canada's alone. They are found throughout the developed world.

Despite these problems we have had the lowest unemployment rate for three decades, and that is due to the policies of the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, 149,000 jobs were lost in 2005. We cannot hide behind the general unemployment rate. The manufacturing industry is having problems.

The petroleum industry was given accelerated capital cost allowances to enable it to develop the tar sands, but when the manufacturing sector needs help, the government refuses to budge. The textile, clothing, furniture, bicycle and aeronautics sectors need accelerated capital cost allowance, but is it not available to them.

The government gave it to the oil companies, yet refuses to give it to the manufacturing industry, which needs it badly. Why?

[English]

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, so far this year, over 220,000 new jobs have been created in Canada. Unemployment rates are at historic lows. The unemployment rate is actually at a 30 year low. The job losses in manufacturing have been offset with job gains in other sectors.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, denying that the manufacturing sector has an unemployment problem will not make the problem go away.

Yesterday, officials of the Aerospace Industries Association of Canada informed us that the Technology Partnerships Canada program will be out of funds by December 31, 2006. This while the industry is in growth mode. It is essential that the government send a clear message to all stakeholders in this industrial sector.

Can the Minister of Industry guarantee that the Technology Partnerships Canada (TPC) program will be renewed for the long term to reassure Canada's aeronautics industry?

[English]

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House we recognize the importance of the aerospace industry and the defence sector within the Canadian economy. We realize that the industry faces significant future challenges to compete in the global marketplace, and as such we are reviewing the existing strategic framework and all options before deciding on which way to move forward.

Oral Questions

●(1430)

SOFTWOOD LUMBER

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, with the talks apparently breaking off, it looks as though the Prime Minister's softwood surrender is starting to collapse, and that is a good thing because quite frankly, the deal that he was trying to ram through was a compromise and a sellout of our sovereignty.

Despite the bullying tactics of this government with regard to the industry, it is the industry that is standing up for Canada.

Is the government going to provide the loan guarantees that the industry needs and should rightly have, so that it can stand up for Canada, protect Canadian jobs and communities, and protect Canadian sovereignty?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said before, the government is working hard to ensure that the final legal text reflects the agreement in principle that was arrived at between the two governments, supported by the provinces, and by most players in the industry.

I find it exceedingly strange that a party that consistently talks about supporting the interests of workers in this country would find itself aligned with only lawyers on both sides of the border who are really the only people who want to continue with this dispute.

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would invite the Prime Minister to come and attend with me some of the smaller mills in this country, and we will talk to the workers right on the front line together. That is an open invitation to the Prime Minister because he would rather, quite frankly, sign a disastrous deal than fight for a good deal for this country. After all the rhetoric in the election about standing up for Canada, we have not seen it.

I am asking him if he is sending negotiators to Washington in order to give away more of our Canadian sovereignty or in order to fight for Canadian jobs and Canadian workers?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listen to the three opposition parties and one day we are going too fast on the deal, and the next day we are going too slow on the deal.

What the industry realizes and what workers in this industry realize is that these three parties do not have a clue how to deal with this issue. That is why this party represents that industry and that is why we will get the best deal we can for this country.

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CANADIAN HERITAGE

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the government House leader, behind whom a growing number of ministers are hiding, seemed to suggest that because the heritage minister disclosed her conflict of interest to the Ethics Commissioner, her conflict must somehow be acceptable as a result of this.

Canadians demand better. The minister, by disclosing her assets to the Ethics Commissioner, allows the Canadian public to see that she certainly is in a conflict of interest. It does not, however, resolve that conflict.

Therefore, how does the government intend to prevent the heritage minister from making personal financial gains from the allocation of government funds to a company in which she holds an important stake?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member has this completely wrong. There is a process in place whereby ministers and parliamentary secretaries make complete disclosure to the Ethics Commissioner. That has been done in every case on this side of the House.

Of course there are directives and suggestions from the Ethics Commissioner. I can inform the House that all directives have been complied with and particularly in this case that the member has mentioned.

Hon. Dan McTeague (Pickering—Scarborough East, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when the Minister of Canadian Heritage finally emerged yesterday from behind her deflector shield, she said she was not in any conflict of interest because the granting body is independent. We know that the company in question receives government funding. Even with the minister's financial stake in the company, it strains credulity to think that the granting body is suddenly going to deny any future funding to a company that is a major player in our Canadian film industry.

How will the government prevent the heritage minister from making personal financial gains with the help of funds entrusted to her and when will she divest herself of these shares?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that hon. member is a member of a party that allowed a blind management trust to allow the former prime minister to have his own company in it.

This is a more open process that we have. The member has made full disclosure. The Ethics Commissioner is completely satisfied and so should the hon. member be.

* * *

HEALTH

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when the Prime Minister asked this minister to take over the health portfolio, there seems to have been some confusion. Instead of focusing on reducing wait times in this country, establishing a mental health commission, implementing catastrophic drug coverage or ensuring that aboriginals and seniors in our country receive the very best in health care, this minister has been looking after his personal investment portfolio.

Canadians do not want stock tips. They want a minister who is going to take action on health care. My question is simple. When will this minister just sell his shares?

Oral Questions

●(1435)

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, the hon. member has it completely wrong. All the members on this side of the House have made disclosure to the Ethics Commissioner. The Ethics Commissioner has had a look at that process. It is a fair process, it is an open process, and there has been complete compliance on this side of the House.

The hon. member should appreciate that and applaud that.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, how can we appreciate or applaud a minister who has not done any work on the health care file when it is the number one priority for Canadians across this country?

The role of the Ethics Commissioner is to ensure that there is disclosure. That is how we have learned that there is a conflict of interest. It is very apparent that this conflict of interest is being promoted by Industry Canada. This minister is getting help from Industry Canada to have his drug company on its website.

Canadians want a health minister who is going to be promoting health for Canadians, not this minister's personal drug company, called Prudential. When will he sell his shares?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can tell you what has become obvious. That hon. member is only interested in doing a bit of muckraking. She obviously does not have any concern for the health portfolio of this country because otherwise she would pay attention.

I will just give an example. Sun Media, having a look at the disclosure by the members on this side of the House, said that we are a group of ordinary Canadians.

I will tell the House what is not ordinary. It is the extraordinary Minister of Health that we have in this country.

* * *

[Translation]

KYOTO PROTOCOL

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, with the means available to it, Quebec decided to go ahead and try to reach 75% of the Kyoto target for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. If the federal government stopped dragging its feet and did its part by signing a bilateral agreement with Quebec, and by contributing the \$328 million needed, 100% of the target would be reached.

Is the environment minister aware that, by refusing to support Quebec in its efforts, she is slowing everyone down?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us just examine where the Bloc has been on this issue. The Bloc members first said they were against any hike in gas prices. This week they are saying they are in favour of increasing the prices at the pumps because they want to see taxation on the oil and gas industry.

They do not know what they believe, but I can tell the House what we believe. I can assure the House that the federal government will not increase taxes on gasoline that will result in Canadians paying more at the pumps. We have no problem targeting those who pollute. We will not make commuters pay. We will make polluters pay.

[Translation]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I invite the minister to respond to the repeated requests from the Quebec government and all of Quebec.

The minister keeps repeating that she wants concrete results and significant reductions. Well, the plan proposed by Quebec will give concrete results. The minister simply has to sign the bilateral agreement with Quebec. Such an agreement would help not only Quebec, but it would also help Canada reach its targets.

If the minister stubbornly refuses to sign a bilateral agreement, she must recognize that her refusal is based on nothing but pure dogmatism. Will she admit this, once and for all?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said repeatedly and have said to the minister of the environment in Quebec, who agreed with me when we met, the largest cause of pollution and greenhouse gases in Quebec is transportation.

I am excited to see that the province of Quebec is moving to curb its pollution and greenhouse gases in that area. We have done it at the federal level by making the largest investment in clean public transportation in Canadian history, and a great deal of that money goes to Quebec. We also offered incentives to make sure Quebecers get out of their cars and take public transportation.

* * *

[Translation]

SOFTWOOD LUMBER

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, when he announced an agreement in principle on softwood lumber, the Prime Minister said that loan guarantees were not necessary because the dispute was practically settled. A month and a half later, we still do not have an agreement.

In any event, the Americans have stated that even if the agreement were signed today, they would not be able to refund the illegally collected duties until April 2007, 10 months from now.

Since companies urgently need ready cash—many are on the brink of bankruptcy—will the government finally agree to provide loan guarantees, which everyone in the industry is calling for, not just the lawyers?

Oral Questions

●(1440)

[English]

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we had the pleasure of having representatives of the forestry industry at the industry committee this morning and they were quite anxious to see us move ahead in the way that we are moving ahead. We do not need loan guarantees. We need to guarantee this industry. We need to have a long term solution and that is what the forestry sector wants.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-Yves Laforest (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in contrast to the parliamentary secretary's answer, what we are asking the government to do is quite simple: just help the industry.

I would remind the Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec that he does not have the right to abandon the thousands of people working in the softwood lumber industry.

Does the minister realize that he too will be personally responsible for the loss of thousands of jobs in the regions if he does not manage to convince the government that the industry urgently needs loan guarantees?

[English]

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is the legacy of the Liberal Party. We have seen mills closing and tens of thousands of jobs either lost or pending. What this government and this minister have done is taken a position on the side of Canadian workers. We want to see Canadian mortgages secured and jobs for the next nine years. It is a great deal and we would like to see the Bloc support us in this deal.

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ATLANTIC CANADA OPPORTUNITIES AGENCY

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is clear that minister for ACOA is unable to take any kind of criticism. Just the other day, the foot in mouth minister indicated that MPs should register as lobbyists simply because they support projects for community or business groups in our ridings, which is our job.

It is not clear if the minister's brilliant idea applies to all MPs or just opposition MPs. However, would he indicate whether or not he intends to register as a lobbyist when seeking funds for projects from ACOA or any other federal departments for the people of Central Nova?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, contrary to Liberal members opposite, this party is interested in having an impartial, functioning regional development agency that helps aboriginal people, helps women and helps youth in Atlantic Canada. That is exactly what we are doing.

The good work of ACOA has been applauded by a lot of people in the business community throughout Atlantic Canada. There have been numerous announcements made by the government to assist the

development, the innovation and the research going on within Atlantic Canada.

I can say this. There is no greater supporter of the innovation, the development and the support for the economy of Atlantic Canada than this Conservative Prime Minister.

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the people of Atlantic Canada know who supports ACOA. It is the Liberal Party that supports ACOA.

There are more questionable comments. During the recent Nova Scotia election, the minister dangled federal cash in front of voters on behalf of a Conservative candidate, indicating that if the candidate won he would only need to knock and the minister would answer it with cash in hand. His candidate lost.

Will the deserving people of Preston be punished because their MLA is a hard-working Liberal member and their federal member is a hard-working New Democrat?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if that member and Liberal members opposite are so in support of ACOA, why are they complaining when millions of dollars are going into the region to support business initiatives?

The Liberal member of Parliament from Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe said in the *New Brunswick Telegraph -Journal* today, "Both sides of the House agree that ACOA must be apolitical, effective and supported by the national government".

That is exactly what is happening. That is exactly what this government is going to continue to do. In spite of the efforts to stop money going into Atlantic Canada and in spite of the leadership candidate of the Liberal Party that the member is supporting, we are going to continue to do the good work that ACOA is completing in Atlantic Canada.

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on March 26 Canadian citizen Huseyincan Celil was detained in Uzbekistan and is facing deportation to China, where he has been sentenced to death in absentia for defending basic human rights. In April, the foreign affairs minister assured this House that he would use all possible and necessary diplomatic measures to secure his release. Now we learn that Mr. Celil has been moved to another unspecified location.

Can the minister tell us if he knows where he is and whether there is any progress to report on his safe release?

●(1445)

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for the notice that he was going to be asking this question today and for the question. I have met personally with Ms. Celil. She is also with child and I have a great deal of sympathy for the ordeal that she and her family are facing.

Oral Questions

Consular officials have met with Uzbekistan officials to continue the effort to assist Mr. Celil personally. He has also had a number of visits. We continue to seek more visits. His extended family has had the ability to supply him with food and basic nourishment.

As well, I have sent a diplomatic note to the government of Uzbekistan demanding that Mr. Celil be returned to Canada or at least be given reasons for his detention. We are going to continue each and every effort, each and every day.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think the minister has been misinformed by his own officials. Uzbekistani authorities have just advised the family that they would have preferred to release Mr. Celil to Canada but that “there has not been sufficient pressure or concern raised by the Canadian government”, contrary to the minister's claims.

Will he immediately contact the Uzbekistani ambassador in Washington, negotiate the terms of a release, and obtain the necessary visas so that a government delegation can go to Uzbekistan and bring this Canadian back home to his family?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while I appreciate the indignation from the member opposite, that is not going to help the case of Mr. Celil. As I have indicated, we have had regular contact with officials in Uzbekistan. We have made numerous interventions on his behalf to secure his release. We will continue to do so.

If the member opposite is actually in receipt of accurate information, I wish he would provide it to me personally rather than trying to politicize this case on the floor of the House of Commons. That will not help Mr. Celil.

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PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Dave Batters (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the RCMP is in need of more office space. There has been much speculation and discussion on this file.

Can the parliamentary secretary for public works give us an update on this file?

Mr. James Moore (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with regard to the potential lease and purchase of the former JDS Uniphase building, this process and agreement was initiated under the former Liberal government. Canadians voted for change and a higher ethical standard and we are delivering. We will always work to get the best value for taxpayers' dollars and support the RCMP.

To that end, we are moving this file to a new competitive process and in doing so we will be ensuring that no contingency fees will be paid to any lobbyist. We will get right what the Liberals got wrong.

[*Translation*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, not only are the Conservatives abandoning our environmental commitments, they are also abandoning the provinces.

Without the help of the Conservatives, the Quebec government today announced its plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and we have learned that the Conservative government is not discussing anything with Quebec.

Why not officially communicate with Quebec and the other provinces? Can the minister explain why this government is abandoning Quebecers?

[*English*]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us talk about commitments, and let us talk about commitments that this government has already kept in the first four months in office. We said we would help clean up the polluted harbour in Saint John and we have. We said we would clean up the polluted drinking water for first nations and the Minister of Indian Affairs took action and is fixing the problem.

We said we would develop a biofuel strategy and we are. We said we would invest in clean public transportation and we went even farther and made the largest investment in clean public transportation in Canadian history, followed by the first ever incentive for two months of free public transit for people who take the bus.

We said we would clean up the air Canadians breathe and we passed two new pollution laws in four months.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the way the minister talks about doing something serious about climate change and yet does nothing makes many of us believe she might be taking a run at the Liberal leadership race. All we got out of those guys for 13 years was talk and no action.

Perhaps she does not believe she can actually do something about the environment and she might walk across to the Bloc who are unable to do such a thing.

Today the NDP tabled a green transportation plan that would bring in mandatory vehicle emission standards similar to California and to the announcement today in Quebec.

When will the minister follow the leadership of New Democrats and Quebec and commit to mandatory vehicle emission standards in this country?

● (1450)

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first, that was the lowest blow he has ever dealt me.

Oral Questions

Let me go further and say that after 13 years of the agriculture industry and industry looking for a biofuel strategy, it took four months for this government to get every province and territory at the table to set a national target. We are not afraid to set targets and when we set targets we will meet them.

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MARRIAGE

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today we have the rare opportunity to congratulate the Conservative government. Let us savour it. The government is ending its rhetoric and finally embracing the status quo on same sex marriage in Canada.

The government and the Canadian Tourism Commission have begun an advertising campaign targeted at our American neighbours, celebrating Canada as a vacation destination for same sex couples.

May we now take it for granted that the Prime Minister has no intention of reopening in the House the issue of same sex marriage?

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member knows, the Canadian Tourism Commission is a crown corporation that operates at arm's length from the federal government. It is led by its own board of directors. The commission is composed of industry and provincial funding partners.

Industry Canada does not deal with matters such as the commission's decision making process or its program design.

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we all know that the government gives the directive of where to go to the independent commissions.

[*Translation*]

I would like the Prime Minister—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

[*English*]

The Speaker: Order, please. I am sure the hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine appreciates all the help with her question but I cannot hear it. The parliamentary secretary needs to hear the question in order to answer. We need to have some order in the House.

The hon. member for Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine has not run out of time. She will want to continue with her question so we can all hear it.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I would like the Prime Minister to go on record.

Now that it is clear that this Conservative government is satisfied with the status quo regarding the marriage of same-sex couples, can we assume that it condemns discrimination against gay couples and that he no longer intends to reopen this contentious issue in the House of Commons?

[*English*]

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should know that we have a different way of doing things. She does not understand it. I think I had it wrong the first time around.

The Canadian Tourism Commission is a crown corporation that operates at arm's length. She obviously does not understand what arm's length means. It is the mandate of the Canadian Tourism Commission to market Canada as a desirable tourism destination for all markets, which is exactly what it is doing.

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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadians expect leadership from their government. In this regard, the government receives a failing grade for its handling of the crisis at Caledonia.

For 106 days the Prime Minister has been silent. His only comment was an abdication of responsibility labelling the land claim as a provincial matter.

Protests in support of Caledonia are planned across the country, disrupting roads and rail travel for Canadians.

Will the Prime Minister acknowledge his negligence? Will he commit to being an engaged participant in resolving this dispute?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us speak of leadership and let us talk about sanctimony which the Liberals now add as one of their public character flaws.

Yesterday the member for Kings—Hants referred to Barbara McDougall as a “wax museum figure”. Barbara McDougall is one of this country's most distinguished senior citizens.

I ask the hon. member to disavow and withdraw that comment on the floor of the House of Commons if he is interested in leadership.

• (1455)

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, she is a distinguished citizen but she should attend more meetings.

The member for Haldimand—Norfolk wrote her constituents and said that she wished she could walk in and take down the barricades herself.

Wishing on a star only worked for Jiminy Cricket. The member should have wished that the Prime Minister had shown leadership.

When will the Prime Minister respond to his own caucus, to the people of Caledonia and to Canadians? When will he accept the government's responsibility? When will he take an active role? When will he commit to ensure a resolution of this issue?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member well knows and as the House knows, the government has been involved in Caledonia. We have had senior negotiators at the table since the dispute began.

We continue to work through Ms. McDougall and Mr. Doering, with the Government of Ontario, within our respective constitutional jurisdictions. Considerable progress has been made over the last few days.

What is appalling is that a member of the Liberal Party would resort to referring to a respected and distinguished Canadian, who is helping to resolve this issue, as a wax museum figure. It is beneath contempt.

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[Translation]

OLDER WORKERS

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Speech from the Throne mentioned something about a plan to help older workers. The House unanimously voted for such a plan, and the necessary funds have been allocated in the budget. Several weeks ago, the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development told us about feasibility studies on this issue.

Given that the minister has had plenty of time to develop an assistance plan for older worker, when will she announce its implementation?

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government recognizes the importance older workers make to both Quebec and Canada as a whole. Older workers help increase our country's productivity and competitiveness.

The Minister of Human Resources remains committed to finding ways to encourage older workers to stay on the job longer while helping those who lose their jobs to return to employment.

[Translation]

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, older workers cannot wait several more months, and that is what is likely to happen if the minister has one feasibility study after the other to justify doing nothing. This is a humanitarian issue affecting older workers in all regions, including those in Huntingdon, Montmagny, Sherbrooke, Waterville, Drummondville, who cannot find other jobs in spite of their efforts.

Does the minister intend to show compassion and announce a support program for older workers?

[English]

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government recognizes the important contributions older workers make to Canada as a whole, as well as Quebec.

The recent budget committed to doing a feasibility study in consultation with the provinces. The study will examine current programs and potential options for addressing the needs of older workers.

Oral Questions

DECORUM

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, matters of basic decency in the House need to be dealt with firmly so unacceptable behaviour is not condoned.

The House received a semblance of an apology from two parliamentary secretaries for their crude gestures during Tuesday's vote. However, as the video tapes show, there were perhaps eight, ten or more other Conservative MPs making exactly the same gestures. It was an epidemic.

Will the Prime Minister, with respect to all of the offenders, unequivocally reject their gross behaviour and apologize to Canadians for the insult?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we on this side of the House have nothing to apologize for. However, what those members could do is apologize to the Minister of Health.

When the country needed leadership during the SARS epidemic, it was the Minister of Health, when he was the provincial minister of health, who stepped forward and provided the leadership the country needed. He deserves an apology.

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CHARITABLE DONATIONS

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians have proven to be generous in giving to worthy causes. It is important that non-profit organizations and charities be able to raise funds easily and that roadblocks to giving are removed.

This government promised to make changes to making giving easier. Could the heritage minister tell us what actions the government has taken to encourage donations and how this will benefit the arts community?

• (1500)

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in its first budget this government gave \$50 million directly to the Canada Council for the Arts. Not only that, we introduced a new innovative mechanism to support the arts. The elimination of the capital gains tax on publicly traded shares donated to non-profit organizations has proven profitable.

I have heard anecdotally that in mere weeks almost \$80 million has been donated to cultural organizations. This is the public and private sector working together for Canada's arts.

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AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for every dollar we export to Korea, Canada imports \$268 of Korean made vehicles. This means Canada has a \$3 billion trade deficit with South Korea equal to 15,000 lost manufacturing jobs. Now the government is walking blindly into free trade talks with Korea without thinking out the consequences to the auto industry.

Points of Order

Will the government insist that the Korean auto deal that is happening right now will put Canadian cars on equal footing in Korea or it will ditch the deal altogether?

Hon. David Emerson (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada has been working for about 18 months on consultations with Canadians and negotiations with Korea on the potential for a free trade agreement with Korea. I can tell the hon. member that we would only enter into such an agreement if there were substantial benefits to the Canadian economy.

We have consulted extensively with the automotive industry on both the Canadian side and the U.S. side. The hon. member should also know the Government of the United States is also negotiating with Korea. The last thing he should want is the Americans to have a deal and us not to have one.

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is not just about free trade. It is about one way trade that is happening right now and there are protectionist items that are currently preventing Canadian vehicles from being exported to South Korea. Those are regulations and rules that need to be cleaned up first.

Why does the government not get action on that file now before selling us out like it did on softwood lumber?

Hon. David Emerson (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Pacific Gateway and the Vancouver-Whistler Olympics, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member might want to ask himself about his logic. He talks about a trade deficit in automotive parts, accessories and vehicles with Korea. What about the relationship with the United States? Will he stand up and say that we should have balanced trade in automotive products with the United States and kill the thousands of jobs that have been brought to Canada because we do have a surplus with the United States?

* * *

DECORUM

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would note that the Minister of Health closed more hospitals in Ontario than his margin of victory in the last election.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, during committee proceedings on Bill C-2, used the most obscene language. His vulgarity was caught on tape. He denied it until he was caught. He has apologized only for his hand gestures, not for his foul language in the committee.

The House needs a complete apology and the Prime Minister needs to give this clearly immature individual some time off to mellow. Will he do so?

Hon. John Baird (President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the people of Ontario are waiting for an apology from the Liberal government which cut the health care budget in this country by \$25 billion. The only government in this country that cut health care and created a crisis was the Liberal government, of which that member was a member. He should stand in his place and apologize to the people of Canada.

[*Translation*]

JUSTICE

Mr. André Arthur (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, during his inquiry, Justice John Gomery learned that federal judge positions in Quebec had been granted, in fact sold, in exchange for contributions to the Liberal Party of Canada, but he refused to investigate. Every citizen who will one day appear before these judges should be worried about this.

Quebec's chief justice is the former president of the Liberal Party of Canada; a credible investigation will not come from the current judicial authorities and the government has a duty to reassure us about the integrity of those who are able to decide on the liberty of other citizens.

Does the government intend to investigate—

• (1505)

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice.

[*English*]

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his question and for his work and his concern on this file.

Judicial advisory committees do operate at arm's length from the Minister of Justice in every province to vet candidates for judicial office. The committees include a variety of individuals from the legal and lay communities.

The government believes there is always room for improvement in the appointment process, as we did with the appointment of Justice Rothstein to the Supreme Court of Canada. The government remains open to examining ways in which the process can be improved.

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PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of members of the Canadian Forces Snowbirds team.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

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POINTS OF ORDER

RESPONSE BY MINISTER OF THE ENVIRONMENT DURING ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. With all the noise in question period, there may have been some confusion. We heard the Minister of the Environment claim, we believe erroneously, that the Saint John, New Brunswick harbour has been cleaned up. In fact, raw sewage, to borrow a phrase that has been used before, as we speak is going into the Saint John, New Brunswick harbour. Maybe she meant St. John's, Newfoundland. That was done some years ago.

Mr. Speaker, I think you may want to afford an opportunity for the minister to clarify the record. To say that the Saint John, New Brunswick harbour is in fact cleaned up now might lead to some terrible incident where somebody might go swimming in the harbour, for example, and not realize that it is a very long way from being cleaned up.

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am glad the hon. member raised this. What I said was that we said we would help clean up the Saint John harbour and we are.

As Minister of the Environment, I can assure him one of the things I was most concerned about when I went to take what the locals call the “toilet tour” and saw the 65 raw sewage outlets pouring into Saint John harbour was the fact that when I returned to my department I found out that there was never a plan put in place by the former Liberal government. No plan was ever put in place, no money allocated, no plan designed to clean up the harbour.

The Speaker: I am not sure that was a point of order, but I am sure all hon. members appreciate the clarification on all points.

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BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with respect to the procedures of the House, I wonder if the government House leader could indicate the order in which he expects to call business tomorrow and for all of the days of next week. I would like to receive from him, if he could, an indication of what he intends with respect to Friday, June 23, whether the House will be meeting and working on that day. Also, which day next week will he formally designate as an opposition day?

I wonder if he could also explain, with respect to Saint John harbour, why the government promised \$40 million and delivered \$2 million.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am still trying to figure out why after 12 years in government the Liberals did nothing about Saint John harbour. There was not even a plan, according to the Minister of the Environment. Surely that is shocking.

With respect to the business of the House, we will continue with the NDP opposition motion today.

Tomorrow we will consider Bill C-5, public health; Bill C-12, the emergency management act; and time willing, Bill C-16, fixed dates for elections.

I can confirm that Monday will be the eighth and final supply day.

Tuesday we will begin debate on the report stage of Bill C-2, the federal accountability act.

Other business will include Bill C-17, an act to amend the judge's act and certain other acts in relation to courts; and Bill C-3, bridges and tunnels.

I would like to confirm that it is the government's intention to refer Bill C-17 to committee before second reading, pursuant to Standing Order 73(1).

Business of Supply

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1510)

[*English*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—SENIORS

The House resumed consideration of the motion and of the amendment.

The Speaker: When the House broke from the debate for question period, the hon. member for Burnaby—Douglas had the floor. The time allotted for his remarks had ended, but there are five minutes for questions or comments consequent on the hon. member's speech.

[*Translation*]

The hon. member for Beauharnois—Salaberry.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Beauharnois—Salaberry, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his speech, which I listened to carefully. I believe he comes from British Columbia. I would like him to tell me whether in his province there is an ombudsman, a public trustee whose mandate is to protect the rights of seniors and other vulnerable persons.

What the NDP motion is proposing are measures that are provincial responsibilities. I would like the hon. member to give me his version of what goes on in his province. What structures and services are available in British Columbia to help and support seniors and to defend their rights?

[*English*]

Mr. Bill Siksay (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in B.C. there is an ombudsperson's office but not exclusively with jurisdiction over seniors issues. Seniors in British Columbia have told us in the NDP that more resources are needed for advocacy work, that the kind of measures we are talking about in today's motion are needed.

Not every province has reached the exalted and inspired state that Quebec has for instance. There is still a real need to have an advocacy role in the areas where the federal government is involved in providing programs and services for seniors, where it is failing seniors in Canada. That is what the motion talks about.

I was in Esquimalt last weekend with some of my colleagues. One of the main issues that was raised in discussion with me and others was the need for advocacy. A lot of the advocacy that happens now is informal. It is a kind of peer counselling association, which is very important, where one senior helps another.

People in the city of Victoria and the greater Victoria region are trying to raise that up a notch to have paid advocates. Their role would be to work with seniors to make sure that they take advantage of the programming that is out there and to help them lobby for improvements to those services. That is another level which does not exist in British Columbia and which is very important.

Business of Supply

They were enthused about the idea of a federal seniors advocate who would work on those kinds of programs. The seniors advocate would be part of the federal government structure and would always have his or her eye on seniors programming, the programs that exist, the programs that need to exist. The seniors advocate would work with members in the seniors community to make sure that took place.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the motion before us today is impressive in its scope and vision for creating a new reality for Canadian seniors.

In the northwest of British Columbia we see many seniors, particularly those on fixed incomes and low incomes struggling with the basic needs of day to day life. They are struggling with how to pay for medicine that they so desperately need, how to pay for food, clothing, shelter, and so on.

There have been many years of surplus budgets at the federal government level, yet we have seen the clawback of services and spending on the most vulnerable in our society. In this case we are talking about seniors.

In the case of a senior on a fixed income, I wonder if the hon. member could speculate on why it has taken so long to forcefully push this issue in front of the government of the day. Why has it taken so long? There is so much money available for wars in Afghanistan and any little pet project the Prime Minister can think of, but we have been unable to serve the seniors community in this country properly and address their most basic needs.

• (1515)

Mr. Bill Siksay: Mr. Speaker, that is the billion dollar question. There is lots of money when it comes to tax cuts for wealthy people and for corporations in Canada, but there is nothing for program spending for the people who really need it. We have worked long and hard in this corner of the House to bring a balance to that kind of economic planning.

Instead of estimating the cost of programs, let us estimate the cost of not having these programs. We know the cost that existed in our society when we did not have medicare. Seniors in particular know that cost because most of them were around and remember the days when they had to worry about how they would pay for medical coverage, when they had to worry about whether or not they would receive medical treatment when they were ill, whether or not they could afford it. They know what that was like and what a difference that program made in the lives of all Canadians.

They know what a difference it made when Canadians got together to collectively work to solve those kinds of problems. Some of that impetus has been lost. The political will to seek those collective solutions has been lost. We have the political will in this corner and perhaps there is some of that will in some of the other corners of the House, but we need to get that back on the agenda and make sure that the important programs, like the ones we are talking about in this initiative today, such as home care, pharmacare and dental care are implemented. We need to make sure that our medicare system is working.

Those are important priorities that we need to work on together as Canadians to make sure that everyone is able to live a full and high quality life here in Canada.

Hon. Shawn Murphy (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the House for the opportunity to rise and speak to this motion, and I want to say at the outset that I do support the motion.

It gives a strategic, coordinated approach to this multi-faceted area dealing with seniors in this country. We can call it what we want, but I would like to see it condensed into a national seniors strategy. I congratulate the member opposite for bringing this motion to the House.

This is a very important issue for all Canadians. As has been stated before in this House, there are some very fundamental demographic shifts going on in this country. In the year 2001, one in eight Canadians were aged 65 or over. In the year 2026, that will reach one in five Canadians.

Seniors are not a homogeneous group, and if anyone tries to interpret that in this debate or suggest that, I believe they do so in error. As we speak, somewhere in Canada there are 72 year old men or women teeing off at a golf course. Those individuals have the benefit of a public or private pension plan, own their own home and have their health. The issues that concern them are probably issues of lower taxes. They want somebody to stop the slide of the stock market and they want the government to leave them alone.

At the same time, there are other 72-year-old people living in one of our inner cities who have health issues, security issues, housing issues and other issues, and are looking to the government for help. That is something that governments at all levels have to respond to, but again the point I am making is that we are not dealing with a homogeneous group.

There are seniors living in very challenging circumstances and that is the cohort within the larger group where we do have to focus our attention and we do have to come forward with a very comprehensive and inclusive strategy.

I should point out that there has been a lot done over the last number of years. There are still some major gaps, as members will hear today from myself and from other speakers, in the policies and programs that are offered to seniors, but a lot has been done.

In the year 1981, 20.8% of seniors would be classified as living in low income circumstances. By the year 2001, that figure was reduced to 7.3% of the senior population, which I consider to be a dramatic decrease in this number; however, if one is part of the 7.3% it really does not help all that much.

There have been some very progressive programs adopted by the Liberal government over the last number of years, of which I am very proud. I am very proud to have been part of it. It does not quite go all the way, but it certainly has made some tremendous strides in this whole issue, and I am now dealing with the whole area of economic security.

Business of Supply

The framework policy is of course the guaranteed income supplement. Members will recall we used to have the old age pension. We still have it but it has been changed dramatically. The cornerstone of our economic security for seniors now is the guaranteed income supplement, and that was increased in the 2005 budget by \$2.4 billion over two years, which would be an increase of approximately \$400 per year for single seniors and approximately \$700 per year for couples.

I should point out that other provinces, particularly Ontario and Saskatchewan, offer supplemental benefits over and above what is offered by the federal guaranteed income supplement program.

• (1520)

There is a basic policy of economic security for seniors living in Canada. Is it enough? Probably not. Has there been a dramatic improvement over what was available 10 years ago? The answer is yes. This may be an error in the motion, but this particular program is tied to inflation. I believe it is increased twice or four times a year based upon the rise in the consumer price index.

Another program that I am very proud of that has been enhanced over the years is the Canada pension plan, our public pension plan. Most plans in other countries are underfunded and have all sorts of problems. Our plan is and will be for the next 40 years actuarially sound. I am very proud of this plan. It is part of the economic security offered to seniors. However, there are a lot of seniors who do not qualify for benefits under the Canada pension plan.

The increase in the amount that can be contributed to an RRSP and the increase in the year that withdrawals have to be made from 69 years old to 71 years old have been beneficial steps in the right direction. The announcement in the last budget by the finance minister of increasing the deduction from \$1,000 to \$2,000 is also a step in the right direction.

I hope that most of the legislative changes that the previous government adopted dealing with pension protection will help, but again we are into some jurisdictional issues here. The whole area of private pensions in Canada will require more work by the present government and by provincial governments right across Canada.

We heard of the situation which occurred in Nackawic, New Brunswick, where people who had worked for 25, 30 and 35 years basically lost their pensions. It is my position that this should not happen in a country like Canada. If it does happen, then we as legislators and people in the provincial assemblies who are supposed to protect these workers are just not doing their jobs.

Another matter that I have some concern about is the funding of our private pension plans. I do not believe the law is vigorous enough. We are going to see problems in the years to come. A lot of private pension plans right across Canada are underfunded and I know the primary obligation is on the owner to bring these plans up to a proper level.

This is a multi-faceted motion. It is an omnibus issue and touches on the lives of a lot of seniors. It talks about housing. It is my position that this is a basic right of seniors. The federal government provides some funding for affordable housing programs and for seniors housing programs. The primary jurisdiction is in the provinces.

The federal government has an obligation and a duty to work very closely with its provincial counterparts so that seniors have the housing they deserve. The benchmark that is being used in most of the provinces, and I accept this, is 30% of a person's gross income. No person should pay more than 30% of their gross income toward their accommodation needs and accommodation should be available to all persons.

The motion talks about wellness, health promotion and preventive measures. I agree that there is a role for the federal government, but again it is a provincial issue. This is something that has to be included in a national seniors agenda with a clearly defined focus and strategy.

• (1525)

Again, this talks about the preventive measures, it talks about drug costs, it talks about drug accessibility, and it talks about public education. It speaks of the services that are available to seniors. This is why I am agreeing with this particular motion.

We talked about primary health care. In Canada we have a universally funded, publicly accessible health care program.

The motion talks about some expansions to this program that should be made available to seniors, and I certainly agree with the gist of the motion. It talks about dental care, product care, home care, and other forms of health care that are particular to seniors, and I agree. That is why the way it is worded in the motion is quite correct.

Another area that calls for additional resources and changes in policy is this whole area of self-development.

One of the programs which I was so proud to see brought back, and I was disappointed of course when it was cancelled, is the new horizons program. This is a program that is available to seniors groups right across the country. It is not a large amount of money, but it provides seniors groups with certain amounts of funding so that they can get established, get organized, come together for recreation, education, or for whatever needs and wants.

Again, we are not talking a lot of money. However, this was a program that was cancelled back in the mid-90s and was implemented about two years ago now, and the budget is, I believe, \$50 million a year. I have experience with a lot of these applicants who have applied for this program. It is a good program and I am proud to be associated with the re-establishment of this particular program.

When I am speaking of this issue, I do want to acknowledge and pay tribute to the National Advisory Council on Aging. It has certainly done a lot of great work over the years on this whole issue. Any of the papers, documents and positions that it has come forward with have pushed the envelope on this particular issue and it has been very helpful over the years.

One thing that did disappoint me in the last organization of the last government was the dropping of a separate minister responsible for seniors. In the last government we did have a secretary of state for seniors and it was his job, it was a he in the last government, to bring together different departments and to bring a seniors' focus to the whole government agenda. I believe that this is needed, and I believe that is exactly what this motion speaks to.

Business of Supply

This motion calls for a national seniors agenda, and again we are not talking about a homogenous group but a collaborative group. Every department has to be brought together, not only from the federal government but from the provincial government and also the municipal governments that offer other services, such as public transit, recreational services and so on.

So again, I was disappointed, when the new government was formed in February, that we did not have anyone out there speaking for seniors. Of course it was a major disappointment. In actual fact, I did hear members of that party, prior to the election, speak in this House that it would be part of the government, that there would be a minister responsible for seniors.

Another issue that the motion does not speak to but is something that, at some point in time, this assembly will have to have a debate on, and that is this whole issue of seniors in the workforce

It is more than just seniors wanting to work. When we look at the demographics and the labour shortages developing in certain areas and in certain industries in the country, I believe our economy will need a certain number of seniors to stay in the workforce, maybe not on a full time basis but at least on a part time basis. I have a number of recommendations that I would think the government ought to consider in the future.

● (1530)

The first deals with clawback. Right now certain seniors may want to go back to work, but not on a full time basis. Right now these seniors are receiving the guaranteed income supplement or some other similar program. If they get a part time job and make \$3,000 or \$4,000, that whole amount is clawed back from them. Unfortunately, this is a very severe disincentive for a senior to do anything, and in most cases they will not.

The government should look at this in the next budget. I do not think we are talking about a lot of money. I believe we should look at some program or policy that would remove that disincentive for seniors who want to stay in the workforce in some minor or part time basis.

Another area is mandatory retirement. I believe we are moving beyond that as a society. I think mandatory retirement has been rejected in different provinces. Whatever the programs and policies are, we should abandon the concept all together. Again, this is an issue of policy. Mandatory retirement goes beyond seniors and it gets into our economy generally.

Another important area, which the resolution does deal with, albeit indirectly, is the amount of volunteer work that is done by our seniors. Right now approximately 18% of the population of our seniors volunteer regularly. That is slightly in excess of the average for the Canadian population.

I should point out to members that the people who do volunteer, they volunteer a lot more than the average Canadian. In actual fact, the statistics indicate that a senior volunteers on average of 269 hours per year. This is quite a bit more than the average Canadian that does volunteer.

This ties into the new horizons program. It ties into some of the volunteer programs of the federal government. However, it has to be

tied in with the whole area of a comprehensive seniors strategy that acknowledges the volunteerism of our seniors across the country.

The area of elder abuse requires a lot more public education, although there is more education on that now than there was at this time last year. This is much more prevalent than people think. It is physical and it is financial. A lot of times it involves family members. Many times elder abuse is not reported. A lot more elder abuse occurs than what the statistics suggest. In most instances it is sloughed under the table. It is very much out there in the public. I believe the federal and provincial governments have an obligation to come forward with a very comprehensive public education strategy on this whole issue.

I support the motion and congratulate the member for bringing the motion forward. As far as I am concerned, it wraps around a lot of issues that involve federal, provincial and municipal jurisdictions. It cries out for what I would call a national seniors strategy. This is a strategy that will require more focused attention from the government. When we boil it all down, a lot of times it talks about how and not what.

● (1535)

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Winnipeg North.

Many times across the country we honour seniors with seniors days, seniors activities, seniors proclamations and so on. What we really owe seniors is a great deal more than they are currently receiving.

The seniors charter guarantees the supports that will help to provide seniors with health and well-being. It promotes wellness through promotion and preventative care to keep them active and participating in our community.

The guaranteed access to primary care and home care, aside from the moral correctness of doing this, will do nothing but cost the country, the government, the budget less money. It is much less expensive to support and care for someone at home than it is in a multi-level care facility or in hospital, which is often where seniors end up when they do not have that support at home. In addition, they are far more comfortable, more relaxed and more likely to keep participating if they are in their own home. Therefore, there is an economic argument for doing this, not only the moral argument for the comfort of seniors.

This also guarantees access to geriatric care, people who need perhaps a more complex level of care, and palliative care. Many people, but certainly seniors, are choosing to die in a hospice bed or often now in their own home. They need the support to do that, surrounded by their families and the people who love them.

The seniors charter establishes a national prescription drug plan for seniors. I think of a woman who I talked to not very long ago. She retired about three years ago. She now has two part time jobs because she has to pay for her prescription drugs. There are times when she makes a decision to only take one pill per day, instead of the four that she is supposed to take. Even with her part time jobs, she has a problem paying for her medications. That is not acceptable. Those are exactly the people who, if they do not take their full prescription, end up back in hospital.

Business of Supply

Other than the fact that it is the right thing to do, there is an economic argument to keep people out of hospital.

The seniors charter would provide a dental plan for seniors. Seniors often suffer oral side effects from a number of chronic illnesses. Something that can keep them healthy is good nutrition and they can have that, if they are able eat comfortably. Providing preventive dental care is not only the right thing to do, but it will be a cost saving.

We have a proud history in the NDP of innovation and investing in and providing for Canadians. For many seniors over 65, their coverage has been reduced or eliminated so they have to go without.

The Canada Health Act mandates funding for drugs in hospital. Drugs prescribed outside hospital may not be covered by provincial plans. Some of those pharmacare costs can be catastrophic. Many seniors are forced to choose between their health and their pocket book, between eating and taking their medication. I do not think anyone wants to see seniors having to make those kinds of choices.

Many provinces have pharmacare plans, but only for some seniors. Eligibility varies from province to province. Seniors in Halifax deserve the same standard and coverage as seniors in Surrey. It is time for a national standard. It is time for a national dental plan.

● (1540)

The province of Alberta has a seniors dental plan so does the city of Toronto. They are two different examples of effective and affordable dental care for seniors.

Investing in Canadian seniors is the right thing to do. If we invest in seniors, they will invest in us. They are out there in their communities, still participating, volunteering in almost every activity that goes on in our cities.

I am proud that the NDP has launched another Canadian innovation. I thank the member for Hamilton Mountain for her work on behalf of Canadian seniors. I hope that all members of the House will support this important motion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I greatly appreciate my colleague's presentation. I have enormous admiration for her, and I know how committed she is to the most vulnerable people in our society.

However, given that the federal government passed a law in 1991 to put an end to child poverty, yet last year we discovered that there were a million poor children in Canada, and there is even more child poverty today; given that the federal government benefited from the guaranteed income supplement by not giving it to seniors who needed that money, as she so rightly pointed out, and that it thereby saved \$3.2 billion at the expense of vulnerable, needy seniors; given that the federal government achieved a surplus of over \$4 billion with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation but did not reinvest this money in social housing by transferring the money to the provinces, as it was supposed to do; given that the federal government is unable to take care of the first nations as it should, let alone first nations seniors, women and children; given that the federal government is unable to take care of the soldiers and veterans for whom it is responsible, how does she think the federal

government can take care of seniors when they do not even come within its jurisdiction, but are a provincial responsibility?

[*English*]

Ms. Penny Priddy: Mr. Speaker, in answer to how it will be done, I hope it does not depend on the history we have seen. We have to eliminate what I would call family poverty. There is no such thing as child poverty where children live in poverty and their parents do not. Many promises have been made but not kept.

However, we are putting this forward with the expectation that the government will recognize its responsibility for seniors. Perhaps in doing that, it will look at the other promises that have been made. People look forward to the receipt of some of supports to help them raise their children, to provide their children with books or clothes for school or housing. During the time I was in provincial government, I believe Quebec and British Columbia were the only provinces providing any money for off-market housing, and that is a disgrace.

I recognize the history that has come before from promises. If the motion passes, and I expect it to, I expect the government to live up to this promise. Not only do poor children and their families have voices. I do not know about Quebec, but in the province of British Columbia seniors have very loud voices. Many organized groups of seniors will watch this carefully to ensure the government is accountable for this.

● (1545)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): We have time for a brief question and a brief comment and response.

The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the NDP speaks about supporting seniors with a charter that is covering such a wide scope of areas outside of federal jurisdiction, would the member agree that for these goals to be realized, there would have to be very extensive collaboration with the provinces? Therefore, it probably could not be realized without extensive collaboration with the provinces. I would like the member to tell me how the party would do that.

Ms. Penny Priddy: Mr. Speaker, having heard your recommendation that there is only time for a quick answer, my understanding is that there has been an agreement for an amendment to this motion, or at least some discussion about an agreed upon amendment, that this will be done in close consultation with the provinces. The member is correct. There are many places where we cross jurisdictions in the lives of almost anybody we work with, so I take the member's point. My understanding is that this has been agreed to.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is a very important debate for the House and for all of Canada. I am pleased to be part of a caucus that has been forging ahead with an idea that is now beginning to gain resonance across the country.

Business of Supply

The idea of a charter for seniors is fundamental to our notion of a civil society, because in fact it recognizes that we are indebted to those people who built this country and sacrificed so much in growing this nation as well as in fighting world wars and building a future for other generations. We owe it to those people to ensure that they live the rest of their lives in decent conditions with respect and with great admiration.

I do not think that you, Mr. Speaker, or anyone in the House can say we have done a very good job of that. There are too many seniors in our midst who live in abject poverty. There are too many seniors in our midst who live with abuse, with financial, physical, sexual, mental and emotional abuse. There are too many seniors in our midst who are struggling just to preserve some sense of dignity, because it gets awfully difficult to make ends meet when the governments of the day keep pulling and cutting and offloading responsibilities for areas that are fundamentally important to seniors.

Therefore, this debate is very timely. It is meant to be a constructive proposition to the House and to Canadians about what we can do as parliamentarians, as elected representatives, to make a difference in the lives of seniors.

So often seniors tune into this place on CPAC or whatever and see and hear a lot of words. There is a lot of good rhetoric here today about how we are going to care for seniors, but even as this debate goes on it gets shuffled off into jurisdictional issues. We get immobilized worrying about whose area we are treading on and who will do the job.

What seniors are saying to us today is “think outside the box”. We cannot fix the problems of seniors and ensure they live out their lives with decency and dignity unless we actually get a little more creative and a little more willing to spend a bit of money, which will go a long way to making a big difference.

I want to give an example. In my own constituency, seniors are struggling to ensure that there is better transportation, because if there is better transportation, seniors can get out. They can socialize. They can go to a restaurant. They can go to a fitness program. They can go to meet a friend. They can get exercise. They can ensure good emotional health and well-being because they have that kind of freedom.

What do we offer today in that context? Unless we live in the centre of a city that has rapid transit and we are right at the doorstep for that transit, there is no alternative. There are no options. There is no way to be able to just freely live our lives without feeling dependent upon someone else.

In Winnipeg, groups like the Seven Oaks Seniors' Links, the Point Douglas Seniors Coalition and others are trying to put together proposals that cross jurisdictional boundaries, and they are calling on us to do something about it. They ask why they cannot get a little money from the federal government to rent a city bus to go around a neighbourhood and pick up seniors on a regular basis so they can go off and do what they like to do and feel good about themselves.

What answer do they get? That it is not federal jurisdiction and that the federal government cannot possibly give money for a bus service in downtown Winnipeg or the north end of Winnipeg. Why not? It is health and well-being. It is part of ensuring that seniors stay

healthy longer. We all know about the examples, yet we cannot seem to break out of these boxes and do that.

If there is one thing we do today, we should adopt this proposal, this charter. First, it is to say that seniors' rights are fundamental and that is why we want them entrenched in a charter, and second, it is to say “let us start applying this charter”, so that it is not just a bunch of words and gobbledygook. Let us apply it to the day to day lives of seniors.

● (1550)

The transportation issue seems to me to be such a logical one to apply this to, but we can go on and talk about health care generally, as my colleague from Surrey North has done, and talk about the need for seniors to access, on a universal basis, dental care and pharmaceuticals. We have let down our seniors on that front so much that it is hard to actually come to terms with it.

Seniors thought about those promises over the last 13 years under the Liberals and then they looked to the Conservatives under the last budget for some attempt to live up to those promises, whether they were specific promises to establish a national pharmacare program, as the Liberals promised for about four elections in a row, or whether it is the Conservative rhetoric of saying, “We respect our seniors. We want to make sure they do not live in destitution and we will do everything we can”.

Where is the meat? Where is the action? Where is the program?

Why do seniors today have to worry about filling a prescription or putting food on the table? Why do seniors today have to turn down the heat in the dead of winter in Winnipeg because they have to save money to stretch their dollars?

Why, in this day and age, do we not at least recognize that we have an obligation as a society, as a government, to ensure that all seniors have access to basic medical services? Beyond hospital insurance and beyond visits to doctors, we must look at dental care, pharmaceutical coverage or pharmacare, and home care.

These are all things that have been promised over the years and were never acted upon. They are affordable, they are important, and they will make a difference to the way in which our seniors are able to live out their last years. Frankly, I cannot think of anything more important than that.

I cannot think of anything more meaningful than for this Parliament to say that we will make this our undertaking, we will conquer this field and we will do what seniors want us to do. That is to ensure that they can live with some sense of economic security: we will provide a regular increase of OAS and GIS, old age security and the guaranteed income supplement, as the cost of living increases; we will ensure that we act cooperatively with all jurisdictions and forge new programs when it comes to things like transportation and recreation; and we will provide the basics when it comes to health and well-being.

Business of Supply

It is often said that a measure of any society is determined by how we treat the most vulnerable among us. When it comes to seniors in our society today, I think that over the years we have created a situation of making them some of the most vulnerable citizens in our society.

Especially when it comes to older women, our record is deplorable. In fact, we have some of the worst statistics anywhere in the world for poverty among older women. We also have a terrible record of actually preventing this kind of society where people are sandwiched between caring for their kids and caring for their parents without any supports. We have done little to acknowledge the role of family, communities and governments in working together to create the very best for our seniors.

This motion is simply an attempt to forge a new path for our seniors and to make a difference in the lives of our citizens. At the same time, all of us in this House celebrate what seniors are doing on their own on a volunteer basis, without very much help from government. I just have to go through the list in my constituency. Manitoba is a very important example, of course, because we probably have the highest per capita population of seniors anywhere in the country, with more than 157,000 residents aged 65 years or older. That is about 14%. That is expected to increase to 33% by 2001, so we have a particularly critical situation in Manitoba.

● (1555)

We are working hard to prepare for that day with a provincial government that is committed to working with seniors. It has a seniors secretariat and an excellent home care program, but it is still facing many difficulties because it is impossible for the government to do this on its own.

I want to conclude by referencing the good work of organizations such as Point Douglas Seniors Coalition, Seven Oaks Senior's Links, Keewatin/Inkster Neighbourhood Resource Council, Gwen Selter Creative Living Centre, Main Street Age & Opportunity Senior Centre, North Centennial Seniors, Aboriginal Seniors Resource Centre, Filipino Seniors Group, Punjabi Seniors Group, Manitoba Society of Seniors, and many more, as well as people like Al Cerilli, Ron Mills, Archie Orlikow and the late Murray Smith, who have worked so hard for dignity and security for everyone among us. I commend them.

I urge the House to support this motion.

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sure that all members of the House appreciate the ideals that have been articulated by the member.

I am looking at a copy of the NDP platform from the last election. The recommendations in that platform include making investments to create as many as 10,000 additional long care spaces per year for four years. The NDP would support \$1 billion annually to improve home care so that seniors and disabled persons could remain independent. The NDP would move toward a national prescription drug plan, starting with assistance for people facing high prescription drug costs.

I am looking at what was in the Conservative budget and the things that are allocated for seniors. The Conservatives are going to dismantle the secretary of state for seniors, which was created by the

former Liberal government. The budget will be hardest on seniors in the lowest income bracket. In fact, the 2006 budget contains only one single measure directed toward seniors and that is a tax exemption that favours higher income seniors.

Does the member and her party not feel that seniors have been let down with that record of lack of accomplishment on behalf of seniors? Why did the NDP not get a better deal from the government? The NDP turned on the Liberal Party that was going to put forward measures and yet the Conservative government in the unholy alliance with the NDP, got nothing for seniors. It got squat for seniors. How does the member feel about that against those high ideals that she has articulated?

● (1600)

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Speaker, the seniors spoke quite loudly and clearly in the last election about how they felt the previous Liberal government had responded to their needs. They defeated the Liberals because the Liberal government had not addressed their fundamental issues. In fact, the Liberals made life a lot harder for seniors as a result of cutbacks to health care, education, housing and just about every social policy area that would make a difference to seniors.

I am not for one minute suggesting that the Conservatives are any better. I would say in fact that the Conservatives are beginning to look an awful lot like the Liberals. They ignore the seniors and disregard this important legacy that our elders have left us. I say a pox on both of their houses. They have let down the seniors of this nation and have disregarded their fundamental concerns and needs.

The issue that was most disappointing to the NDP leading up to the last election was the failure of the Liberal government to recognize the importance of standing up for medicare. Seniors remember what life was like before medicare. They said to the Liberals over and over again, "You let us down. We will not stand by while you dismantle health care, while you let it be privatized and move us toward a two tier system. We know how important it is".

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have to ask the member, is the NDP not the party that wanted to tax the inheritance of these poor seniors who have saved for all of their lives and wanted something to give to their children? Was it not that party that wanted an inheritance tax?

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Speaker, the member will know that the idea was considered and was withdrawn publicly. It was absolutely acknowledged that it was the wrong approach at this time and we would not pursue that at all.

Today we have an example of how the Conservatives have failed to protect seniors from losing their life savings. There are more examples of the famous income trust story, which continues to be a problem. Many companies are abusing their privileges and failing to fully account to Canadians. Pensioners are losing their savings and the government is standing by idly without taking necessary protections.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, what passion. I know the place my hon. colleague hails from. I have visited Manitoba. I have visited Winnipeg. I know that many cooperatives are doing excellent work there. It is very imaginative.

In Quebec, we have home support cooperatives that take care of household tasks for the elderly. In addition, the government offers a 25% tax credit that enables them to get an immediate tax credit on what they pay for household services.

Does she not think that if more money were transferred to the provinces, her province could do the same and offer more services to the elderly? Would that not be better than trying to arrange for the federal government to supervise these services, which are under the jurisdiction—

• (1605)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. member for Winnipeg North.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her question.

The member is right. We do not want the federal government to do everything listed in our charter.

[English]

We want the federal government to live up to its commitments with respect to transfers to provinces.

[Translation]

That is true. It is important. The problem is reduced federal funding for health, housing and so on. This is the first problem we must address. After that, there are many possibilities for cooperation between different levels of government to try to resolve the issues facing the elderly.

[English]

Hon. Lawrence Cannon (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Niagara West—Glanbrook.

I welcome this opportunity to discuss government measures for the protection of seniors. I fully support the sentiment of the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain that older Canadians are creative, active and valued members of our society. In the actions that the government has taken, we have demonstrated our commitment to ensure that they have the respect and dignity they deserve in their senior years. We are moving on a number of fronts to address their concerns.

It is well known that Canada's population is aging at an unprecedented rate. In fact the number of seniors in Canada is expected to double in the decades to come. We are therefore now putting in place measures to ensure that policies, programs and services meet the evolving needs of today's seniors and those of tomorrow.

Today I would like to focus primarily on financial security. The hon. member has raised the very important issue of income security for older Canadians. Canada's retirement income system is recognized around the world as one of the best. Today more than

four million seniors receive old age security benefits and three million receive Canada pension plan retirement pensions. As well, the guaranteed income supplement, the allowance, and the allowance for the survivor provide an additional income to 1.6 million low income seniors.

This government will ensure that old age security and the Canada pension plan remain fundamental guarantees of income security for seniors in their retirement years.

[Translation]

The Canada pension plan and old age security will be offered to seniors now and in the future. As the chief actuary said, Canada is one of those rare countries that can count on a secure public pension plan. He added that the 9.9% contribution rate will be enough to sustain the Canada pension plan for at least the next 75 years.

He also said that the old age security program remains viable and affordable for the Government of Canada. We can be particularly pleased with the fact that in his report he predicts less dependence on support benefits by low-income persons because of the higher incomes of seniors to come. Canadians can be assured that this financial support is here to stay.

Many people probably do not know that funding the Canada pension plan and old age security is one of the major expenses of the Government of Canada.

In 2004-05, some \$51.6 billion was paid out as direct income support to seniors, which is \$23.8 billion for the Canada pension plan and \$27.8 billion for old age security.

For the most part, thanks to these programs the senior population living in poverty has gone from 21% in 1980 to 6.8% in 2004, which is the lowest level of all time.

• (1610)

[English]

Yet, despite the success in reducing poverty among seniors, there is always more to do. To assist them the government has the guaranteed income supplement which provides some 1.5 million low and modest income seniors with financial support. Payments from the GIS total more than \$6 billion annually.

This government is committed to helping Canada's seniors who built this country and the future seniors who are now building on this foundation.

In budget 2006 we have taken positive steps to fulfill our promise that seniors will be able to keep more of their hard-earned savings by doubling the maximum pension income amount that is eligible for a federal tax credit from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year in 2006. This measure will benefit nearly 2.7 million taxpayers with pension incomes. It will also benefit low and modest income seniors as some 85,000 pensioners will no longer have to pay income tax and will be removed from the tax rolls.

Business of Supply

[*Translation*]

Furthermore, as part of our commitment to the continued viability of Canada's retirement income system, the federal government will discuss with the provinces and territories the possibility of allocating part of future federal surpluses to the Canada pension plan and to the Québec pension plan. This is one of our ways of offering an acceptable level of economic well-being, as the hon. member said so well.

[*English*]

In order to ensure there is accountability for how seniors are treated and to ensure seniors have a voice in government policy decisions, our government will appoint a national seniors council. This council will be made up of seniors and representatives of seniors organizations to advise the minister responsible for seniors on significant issues affecting them.

This government is sensitive to the needs of senior Canadians. The budget addresses financial issues. We have a secure pension system and, through our seniors council, we will be creating a forum for seniors' views to be heard. These are the areas I have focused on but I would like to mention that the government's commitment in health care, affordable housing, public transit and in safety and security also address the particular needs and concerns of seniors throughout the country.

In addition, through Human Resources and Social Development, Canada's seniors secretariat, we work with the provinces, territories and many other partners to promote the well-being of seniors across the country. Through our host of programs, seniors can share their creativity and wealth of talent in helping to build vibrant communities and a stronger Canada.

While I respect the hon. member's good intention in the proposal raised today, I can assure the House that in this month of June, celebrated as Seniors Month in many parts of the country, and in all the other 11 months Canadians can be confident that this government will protect the interests of seniors.

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I must admit that I was not expecting to hear a bunch of platitudes from the minister about what happens with seniors generally or of things that are already there. The motion states that there is a problem out there and that the problem needs to have some new thinking. We can talk about the Canada pension plan being secure for many more decades. That is wonderful. We brought that bill through, Parliament considered it and it is now on a secure footing.

However, to say that pensioners will be receiving another \$1,000 tax exemption on their pension income, that is fine, but what about the seniors who do not have a pension? We are talking about responsibilities that cross jurisdictional lines, right down to the regional government levels which decide what level of social services are provided.

The whole idea here is that there is only one taxpayer but there are at least three or four levels of government that impact seniors. I do not know whether or not I have seen how the government has been responsive to the plight of seniors. The motion is a good motion in terms of debate but I am not sure how it would be implemented or how it could be costed.

Maybe the minister should have come here and said that maybe we should talk about something like a guaranteed annual income for seniors. Maybe we should talk about eliminating all these different benefits and ensure each piece of the pie is directed or redirected in a way which helps those in our society who are destitute, who do not have proper nutrition, who do not have a proper roof over their head, who do not have access to pharmacare and who may not have the home care that they require to live in dignity.

I wonder if the minister wants to reconsider his platitudes and maybe say something about how we help seniors.

• (1615)

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Speaker, I think the words my colleague has brought forward do not, in any shape, way or form, tell us about the actions that this government has undertaken. I expressed a few moments ago the actions this government has taken forward in the support that we accord our seniors. We firmly believe that what we are doing is the correct way of giving seniors financial support.

My colleague seems to forget that the former Liberal government's tax record on seniors is a sad story of unfair taxation, poor government policy and blunders that threatened the savings of the elderly in this country.

Let us not forget that the Liberal government repeatedly threatened during the last session to do away with the planned increase of the guaranteed income supplement in the lead up to the election even though Parliament had already passed it. It was the former government and its minister of finance, the member for LaSalle—Émard, that drastically cut payments to provinces, including cutting some \$25 billion in health care.

I today stand in the House and I am very proud to be part of this side of the House that has, through our Minister of Finance, developed a series of actions that demonstratively give results.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to acknowledge the hon. member for Pontiac and ask him the following question.

In my riding, 800 to 1,000 seniors are entitled to the guaranteed income supplement. I have made a point of tracking them down so that they can receive what they are rightfully owed.

What I find absurd in all of this is that these people who have built Quebec, who have paid their taxes all their lives in Quebec and Canada, do not know that these funds exist for them. These seniors are the most disadvantaged people in society.

In the last Parliament, the Bloc Québécois tabled a bill that would allow these people the retroactive guaranteed income supplement to which they are entitled.

Business of Supply

I would like to ask the hon. member for Pontiac whether he intends to put pressure on his Conservative government and the Cabinet so that these seniors are finally granted a fully retroactive guaranteed income supplement, which is money to which they are entitled.

Hon. Lawrence Cannon: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

Like many other elected officials here in this chamber, I have taken the same action as my colleague, that is, I have gone to see the seniors in my community and suggest to them that they apply for certain programs. He has done so and it is to his credit. In my view, others should follow his example and do likewise.

As for measures that have been adopted, I repeat that we regard these as extremely important. That does not seem to have been the opinion of the Liberals, who for many years have threatened to claw back the money and even reduce transfers in health and other fields—and they did in fact reduce them. That has had major repercussions not only for seniors, but for society as a whole.

Our actions speak for themselves. These are concrete actions we have taken, which are a firm indication of the direction we are taking to assist the seniors in our community.

I was listening earlier to the hon. member from the NDP telling us about the commitments of a government, of any government, to assist seniors. I will cite here an example from the Société de transport de l'Outaouais. I recall that, not long ago, we put in place, as did the nine other transportation corporations in Quebec, measures designed in particular to—

• (1620)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I apologize for interrupting the minister, but the time allotted for questions and comments has expired.

Resuming debate. The hon. member for Niagara West—Glanbrook has the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand in the House today and talk about the motion dealing with the social and economical issues and the well-being of seniors.

Coming from the riding of Niagara West—Glanbrook, which is located in the Niagara Peninsula, the Niagara-Hamilton area is host to the second largest seniors population in the country, behind Victoria, which is why it is an issue that has always been near and dear to my heart.

I want to commend the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain for prompting this important debate on issues of seniors.

As the member knows, our new government stands up for seniors. We have a great respect for the wisdom and experience seniors have to offer and we realize they are the keepers of this wisdom. They have helped to build this country. They have spent their lives raising their families, saving for their retirement and building this country into one of the most enviable nations in the world.

My colleagues and I are proud, in turn, to help support Canadian seniors to enjoy their later years without being overburdened by the concerns of their income, health, housing or their general well-being.

Many seniors are now on fixed incomes and yet their cost of living is anything but fixed. The cost of electricity is rising. The cost of home heating fuel is rising. The cost of drugs and other medical costs are rising, as well.

Seniors today are actively participating in society and in the labour force more than ever. We welcome their contributions and we will continue to look for and apply opportunities to foster their increased involvement.

We all know that seniors have played and continue to play a vital role in our society. Their contributions to the labour market have led to Canada's strong fiscal foundation today. Canada's new government applauds their efforts and hard fought gains and will fight to preserve them.

Canada's seniors are also to be thanked for the rearing of today's skilled and educated workforce, which will ensure our future prosperity. Today, while they are enjoying their golden years, the earned wisdom and talent of our seniors secures the admiration of all Canadians.

Our new government is unwavering in its view that the Canada pension plan, old age security and the guaranteed income supplement are fundamental guarantees of income security in retirement years. We will never reduce those benefits, not now and certainly not in the future.

As part of our commitment to the continued sustainability of Canada's income security system, the federal government will be working with the provinces to examine the possibility of allocating a portion of future federal surpluses to the Canada and Quebec pension plans.

We believe that seniors, who have sacrificed to save for their retirement and have paid into pension plans, deserve our government's support, which is why the 2006 budget helps seniors in many ways. Budget 2006 increased the amount of pension income that could be sheltered from income tax from \$1,000 to \$2,000. This measure, effective for the 2006 and subsequent taxation years, will benefit nearly 2.7 million seniors who are eligible for pension income. Furthermore, it will remove an additional 85,000 pensioners from the tax rolls.

Effective July 1, the GST will be reduced by 1%. This tax relief will help our seniors save all year round with every purchase they make.

Public transit is often the only means of transportation for seniors. Our government has eased these costs in budget 2006 by making transit passes and tickets tax deductible and making them more affordable for seniors. All transit users, including commuters, students and seniors, will qualify.

The Government of Canada continues to work in partnership with provinces, territories and many other organizations to promote the well-being of seniors, with a strong focus on cross-jurisdictional issues, such as safety and security.

Business of Supply

In recent years, for example, elder abuse has become a priority issue for all of our governments. In fact, today is Elder Abuse Awareness Day. Studies suggest that between 4% and 6% of the elderly have experienced abuse in their home and that they are also at risk in institutions, such as hospitals and nursing homes. We realize that raising public awareness is a key tool in response to this abuse and neglect in later life. In this regard, we have collaborated with our partners to develop a public education kit on elder abuse that is currently being distributed across Canada.

We are also working with provincial and territorial governments to establish elder abuse awareness days, local strategies and new legislation to further protect seniors from a crime that is all too often overlooked.

• (1625)

While these programs promote health and well-being, self-development and social inclusion among older Canadians, our new government also respects the rights of seniors to speak out and to influence the federal policies and practices that shape their lives and the lives of their families.

It is with that in mind that I had the opportunity last year under the direction of our Prime Minister to conduct round tables across the country in every province to get a chance to talk to seniors firsthand. One of the things that came back time and time again from seniors was that they were very appreciative of the fact that a government in waiting would take the time to talk to seniors about issues that were important to them. They said that it was seldom that they had a chance to talk about some of the issues that were important to them.

It was because of working with our colleagues across the country in various provinces that we were able to come back and make suggestions which were reflected in our campaign promises to reduce pension deductions and also establish a seniors council. These are things that were done to help build a strong foundation as we move forward on seniors issues because they are very important.

As I said, we continue to listen to these voices. They are expressed through ongoing relationships with representative groups.

In order to ensure that there is accountability for how seniors are treated and to ensure that seniors have a voice in government policy decisions, our government will appoint a national seniors council, which is, once again, one of the recommendations that came out of consultations with seniors across the country in terms of what was important to them.

The council will be made up of seniors and representatives of seniors and seniors organizations to advise the minister responsible for seniors on significant issues affecting them.

It is up to each and every one of us in the House to ensure the needs of older Canadians continue to be met. I say once again, I think so often what happens is that we take a top down approach to government. We decide that we think we know what is best. Very clearly, in establishing a seniors council, ordinary Canadians know what is important. By collaborating with them and working with them in terms of issues that are important to seniors, we can make more effective policy. We can make a larger difference in terms of the lives of seniors.

On the standing committee on human resources and social development, we have had all-party support unanimously across the board, working with the Liberals, the Bloc and the NDP, to look at the issues of not only skills, the shortage of skills and mobility but older workers. I think this is an encouraging sign.

This fall we will cross the country to talk to various groups once again to find ways where we can be more effective and support seniors on some of the challenges that they have.

As we continue to consult with individuals and key stakeholders, seniors organizations and seniors themselves, I believe that over time we will continue not only to develop good policy but we will be able to do the right thing. I think that is what seniors really count on us to do. It is to do the right thing and not just to talk about doing things but actually to implement and be true to our word.

In closing, we have the duty to help and not neglect these wisdom keepers who have helped build our great country. This new government has already, in a short period of time, kept so many of its promises. It will continue to do the same thing over the course of the next weeks and months. We are certainly looking forward as a government to keeping our commitments and certainly as they relate to seniors.

• (1630)

Mr. Brian Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question will focus on the issue of our cities. I probably missed my opportunity with the previous speaker to put this more plainly.

The infrastructure program created by the Liberal Party, with some very good help from the leader of the NDP in a former life, was completely ignored, downplayed and not re-fulfilled. The minister has to read his own budget to see this was ignored.

As my friend opposite knows, many of our seniors are dependent on fixed incomes. Many of them live in cities and are faced with rising property taxes, water charges, sewer charges, and so on, and these charges continue to grow while aging infrastructures are not being improved.

The Conservative government has abandoned the idea of dealing with cities as entities and dealing with them as equal partners at the table. I want to know what the member thinks, without too much prompting, about the future of our Canadian cities as it relates to the fixed costs that seniors have with respect to houses that they own and have paid for in our communities.

Mr. Dean Allison: Mr. Speaker, a number of different issues are challenging our seniors today, one being the rise in their property taxes. A lot of different factors affect their quality of life. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities has endorsed us overwhelmingly for our plan and for what we are going to contribute back to municipalities.

Dealing with seniors issues involves dealing with them at different levels. What do seniors get to keep at the end of the day? How much of their hard earned dollars are they able to actually keep in their pockets?

Business of Supply

We started to address this issue by raising the pension deduction amount so seniors could keep more of their hard earned dollars. They have worked very hard. They have helped to build this country. We need to ensure that in their retirement years seniors are able to keep more of their hard earned dollars and I believe the pension deduction is one good way to start this process.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Nicole Demers (Laval, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would have liked to put my question to the hon. minister who spoke immediately before my colleague. However, I will put it to the member who just spoke.

The minister was telling us earlier that the federal government spends \$51.6 a year on pension and old age security programs. It seems to me that the government is doing very well out of this.

The hours of volunteer work done by seniors in a year are worth \$60 billion. They do volunteer work so that the provincial governments are able to make ends meet. Because of the transfer cutbacks, governments no longer have the resources to pay for the helpers who are needed in hospitals, child care centres, everywhere that people are needed. That includes community organizations that help poor people, the homeless and single mothers, and food banks.

To give \$51.6 billion to people who have given their lives to the country does not impress me at all.

However, I would like someone to explain to me why we do not give more consideration to these seniors, when we know that the poverty line has been set at \$17,000, and the guaranteed income supplement and old age pension amount to \$12,900 a year. That is below the poverty line. Earlier, there was back-patting going on about how the exemption for seniors' income had been doubled, to \$2,000 a year, so that a million and some hundred thousand seniors would no longer pay income tax. The reason they no longer have to pay tax is that they are very poor.

How can anyone smile while saying such things? I would like the member to explain this to me.

• (1635)

[*English*]

Mr. Dean Allison: Mr. Speaker, one of the comments my hon. colleague made was about the great contribution that our seniors make in terms of volunteerism in our communities. I would like to thank her for raising that and it just compliments seniors on the kind of work they contribute to in our communities. We all realize that without that kind of work and the kind of volunteerism that our seniors provide in our communities, we would be worse off as individuals and communities as a result.

My hon. colleague also talked about cuts in transfer payments. I recognize that as well. We realize that through the Liberal government in the past, billions of dollars were cut out of social transfers to the tune of \$25 billion over the last 10 years. We certainly recognize that and I believe that our government, as a result, will continue to ensure the provinces have enough money to look at those things. We recognize that there is a fiscal imbalance and we will work with the provinces to address that issue.

We also realize that the provinces will need not only money for education but for hospitals and all these other things that in recent years were cut back so dramatically.

We recognize the fact that seniors contribute a tremendous amount to our communities and we need to continue to recognize that contribution. We need to recognize the fact that seniors do a great job in our communities and also help make our communities better places in which to live.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to take part in the debate on a motion introduced by the New Democratic Party about the fundamental rights of our seniors, the right to dignity, to respect and to security.

I will be splitting my time with my colleague, the hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan.

I would first like to thank the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain for her excellent work.

[*English*]

She has brought forward a very comprehensive and very detailed motion.

The NDP has of course long been an advocate for our seniors, the people who built this country. We only have to recall such members of Parliament as Stanley Knowles to recall the tireless advocacy on behalf of seniors in this country.

We saw another example in Nova Scotia just days ago, when NDP leader Darrell Dexter made seniors issues a top priority for our party in that election, as he had done in the previous election where he forced the Conservative government, in a minority context, to remove an insidious provision that penalized seniors who needed access to medications but who were living in homes that provided support.

I am pleased to say that there was an improvement in that situation, very much honouring the commitment made by New Democrats, and I hope that same scenario will play out in Nova Scotia as a result of the recent election there.

We believe that at the federal level what is needed is the adoption of a seniors charter. That charter would include provisions for income security for seniors, for housing, wellness, health care, self-development and proper government services. We believe that such a charter would be a major step in recognizing the needs of our aging population and setting up a framework for action.

I will not develop all of these six aspects, as many of my colleagues have actually spoken at length about their importance in this debate, but let me say that action is needed now, because when it comes to seniors, it is the sad fact that time is a key factor. While we twiddle our thumbs as governments, as Parliaments, and simply talk about an issue but do not act on it, these seniors are aging in place. Some of them never end up with the opportunity to access the very things that we spend time talking about.

Business of Supply

Here is an opportunity to move quickly on some key issues facing seniors. I hope the House will embrace it in that spirit. All too often, I find that politicians, and I think we can share this collectively, do not act out of a sense of urgency when we need to. There is a 10 year plan here and a 20 year plan there, but when it comes to coming to grips with the fact that many of our seniors need action now, we stand back. But they cannot afford to wait. They are making decisions each and every day that are very painful.

I know that many hon. members are aware that too many seniors are dealing with an affordable housing crisis. They simply cannot afford the housing they are in. When we talk to them about it, when we speak to them about how they are paying 80% of their meagre incomes just to keep their homes or pay their rents, so often they will say to me, "Oh well, Jack, it's not that bad". They say they will just cut back on some of the basics and they will get by. They say that the food bank is very helpful. The idea that seniors have to go to a food bank after they have spent their whole lives building this country should be a national shame. It is a national shame.

We need to build affordable housing. That is provided for as a fundamental in the charter.

As well, of course, they cannot afford to wait for a health care system that takes care of them adequately. Time is passing. They cannot afford the cost of drugs and dental care, which too often are put aside by seniors because they simply have to manage their weekly groceries.

We have heard from doctors. We have heard from seniors themselves. How many have we heard from who have said they know the doctor wanted them to take a particular prescription, but it is not covered by any plan they have access to and they just cannot afford it. "We'll get by," they say. They should not have to be making those kinds of decisions.

When Tommy Douglas talked about medicare in the 1950s and early 1960s, including in this place in the 1960s, he always spoke about how pharmacare ultimately had to become a part of a medicare system. It is so fundamental now to the health that we pursue with the medical profession. I have talked to seniors who have had to literally make the choice between medication their doctor told them they should have, which would reduce their pain, increase their mobility and could prolong their lives, and food, which their doctor of course also recommends that they eat because they have to eat well.

• (1640)

Making that kind of choice is something that no senior in this country, as affluent as we are, as blessed as we are, should ever have to make, particularly when we consider that seniors made sure that our basic needs were met throughout their entire lives.

Here is an opportunity for us to say that right across the country no seniors should ever find themselves in a situation where they are having to choose between food and dental care, or food and drugs.

Dental care is something I came to know quite a bit about when I was in municipal government and chaired our board of health. We were providing a certain kind of dental assistance to students in the schools right across the city. Many of them had plans, though, and what we focused on was the need for seniors, no matter who they

were, no matter what income they had, to be able to go to a clinic and get access to dental care. We put that in place. I know there are some other hon. members here who were on council at the time we discussed these matters. It now is in place for the entire large megacity of Toronto.

The numbers of seniors I have talked with who said that the ability to get some basic dental care has improved the quality of their life in their senior years so much has underlined to me that this is something we should be ensuring for every senior in Canada, no matter where they live and no matter what their income might be. Self-esteem and general health are fundamentally affected by dental care, so I am particularly thrilled that in this proposed motion there is a concept of ensuring that dental care, as well as drugs, is available to all seniors.

• (1645)

[*Translation*]

Today, more than 250,000 seniors are living below the poverty line. This is truly scandalous. Women make up a large proportion of this group, their retirement income being lower because of the wage gap between women and men, and because pension schemes do not make up for time taken off work to rear children or care for family members who are ill, something that, obviously, is usually done by women.

Adopting this charter would provide the federal government with a clear framework for action to assist our seniors. Obviously, however, some things have to be done in cooperation with the provinces. This is important, and it is possible. For example, the Canada pension plan and the Quebec pension plan operate very well side by side. We can use that approach for measures that are included today in our seniors charter.

The NDP believes that flexibility should be a key element of any action taken by the federal government. This is fundamental. The idea is not to create duplication. On the contrary, the idea is to help the provinces, including Quebec, that have programs of particular importance for seniors, such as drug plans, for example.

The federal government has the funds that are needed to help the province strengthen those programs. We can also help the other provinces to create these programs.

[*English*]

Finally, our motion also calls for the creation of a seniors advocate. The Conservatives have not appointed a minister to be at the table and be specifically responsible for seniors. I think that is unfortunate, but now it is up to Parliament to take a proactive step. We can do that.

We believe it is essential that the charter be brought to life by an advocate. This person would report every year to the House and could make recommendations about the efficiency and effectiveness of all federal government programs with respect to seniors and their special needs.

I urge all members of the House to support our motion. Our seniors have worked hard enough for all of us for so many years. They deserve our support. It is time that Parliament stood up for them.

Business of Supply

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to ask the leader of the NDP a question about seniors' incomes. One of the major proposals that has arisen from numerous seniors' groups to increase their take home pay, particularly that of married, middle class seniors, is to give them fair tax treatment.

Right now any family, young or old, that has a single income is taxed at a disproportionately higher rate than those that have a dual income. For example, a retired couple with \$60,000 in income earned by one of the retirees pays a much higher rate of taxation than the family next door with two incomes of \$30,000.

One way to resolve this unfairness in our tax system would be to allow for income tax splitting, thus allowing the two people to split their incomes and therefore allow their rate to be lowered. I wonder what the hon. member thinks of that policy proposal.

Hon. Jack Layton: Mr. Speaker, I have to say that the priority in our proposals before us today really focuses on those seniors who at the moment are not paying tax because their incomes are so low.

As has been mentioned by some of the other members in the House, we have a shocking situation right now regarding seniors with very, very low incomes, particularly women, and particularly single women who have lost their husbands or are on their own. They have had a lifetime of lower salaries. For some there probably would have been a period of time when they could not be in the workforce so they could raise all of us. The net result is that their incomes are dramatically below the poverty line, a line that we have established is fundamental for basic needs. Even through our own government support programs, if that is what they have to rely on, we do not provide our seniors with enough to reach the poverty line, far from it.

Therefore, I have to say that if we are to make an expenditure or a tax expenditure, our focus would be very much on those very low income seniors who so many of us know are struggling just to get by. That would be the priority.

• (1650)

Mr. Alan Tonks (York South—Weston, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a preamble to my question, I would like to say that having worked with the member, I have no doubt with respect to the sincerity with which he has articulated his principles and the principles that are driving the motion.

However, I have to ask the member a question. In his role as the leader of the New Democratic Party, he was able to create a budget amendment in the last government that covered \$5 billion in everything from the environment to social programs. However, in this particular budget of the government, and given the linchpin importance of the New Democratic Party, is there anything in the government's budget that is serving seniors and that the hon. member can honestly stand up and take credit for?

Having said that, acknowledging that the taxing approach taken in that budget in fact attacks the lowest income earners, with respect to seniors, I would like the member to outline, if he could, how close he thinks he can get to those principles that were entrenched in the New Democratic platform, which talked about 10,000 additional long term spaces, \$1 billion annually for home care services and a

national prescription drug plan, given that the senior secretariat was dismantled by the government.

How optimistic is he that—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. member for Toronto—Danforth.

Hon. Jack Layton: Mr. Speaker, I did have the opportunity to work with the hon. member in municipal government back in the days when, at the municipal level with our meagre resources, we were trying to create some assistance for seniors, particularly with dental care. I appreciated that we were able to work together at that time.

When it comes to the budget of the Conservative government, when the opportunity came to stand and express our views on that budget, our party stood opposed to the budget because it did not meet the tests that we would have established for it. We did not find willingness on the part of the governing party to entertain our ideas. We did not find it with the previous government either until a late stage, but we will not go back into history. We were happy that ultimately we were able to have some useful impact.

We are trying to do it again. This time we are doing it with the concept of a seniors charter that lays out certain principles. If it is adopted by the House, it can then become the measuring stick that we all use to see how all of us here in this place are serving and honouring our seniors with the things they need.

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): It is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Ahuntsic, Citizenship and Immigration; the hon. member for Malpeque, Agriculture.

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to the NDP motion on a seniors charter for Canadians. I would like to thank the member for Toronto—Danforth for sharing this speaking spot with me. I would also like to thank the member for Hamilton Mountain for her excellent work on this very important motion.

I want to focus on a small but growing group of Canadian seniors, first nations, Métis and Inuit elders. We usually think of the population of Canada's aboriginal peoples as being overwhelmingly young. Although this is true, the life expectancy of first nations and Inuit, in particular, is increasing, even though it is still far beyond the average Canadian life expectancy.

In the next 15 years 57,000 more first nations members will be aged 65 and older and the Inuit population over 65 is increasing at three times the rate of the general Canadian seniors population.

In aboriginal communities elders are regarded as important, productive and creative members of their society. They are essential to the survival of language and culture in their communities.

Business of Supply

The problems affecting seniors in the general Canadian population are far worse for first nations, Métis and Inuit elders. For example, the average income for aboriginal elders is between \$5,000 and \$15,000. This is well below the poverty line and is a shocking number today in Canada. Elders also have lack of access to secure housing.

Many of these problems arise from disputes over jurisdictional authority, disputes between the federal, provincial and territorial governments, and no one often claims responsibility for fixing these problems.

Even within the federal government, the departments often do not coordinate their responses. For example, the Auditor General recently reported that mould in housing was an example of where the federal government took responsibility for the problem. Long term care is an area where the provincial government has responsibility and Indian and Northern Affairs has no mandate to provide it on reserves.

I want to talk about a specific case as an illustration of this, the Anishnabe Long Term Care Centre at Timiskaming, Quebec. In this care facility there are approximately two dozen elders, all of whom cannot stay in their own homes any longer. Without the Anishnabe, these elders would have to go to provincially run long term care centres in surrounding communities where French is the operating language. Yet most of these elders speak either Cree or English.

There is a need for the federal government to step up with its provincial partners to provide the range of care facilities that is required. In this context I want to reference the Assembly of First Nations action plan on continuing care. It talks about some elements that are critical to looking at continuing care. Its vision is to provide a holistic continuum of continuing care services, ranging from home support to higher levels of care under first nations control, reflecting the unique health and social needs of first nations. Services are comprehensive, culturally appropriate, accessible, effective and equitable to those accessed by Canadian citizens.

That is specifically dealing with first nations, but I would argue that Inuit, Métis and other aboriginal people should have access to services that are culturally appropriate.

There are also other critical issues impacting on the health of elders. For example, epidemics such as diabetes mean more first nations, Métis and Inuit elders live in poor health longer than the general Canadian population. More and more these elders will need options that will keep them in their community where the care is culturally appropriate and in their own language, without fighting through multiple layers of bureaucracy.

I want to move to another topic in terms of mental health. A recent Senate report on mental health referred specifically to these inter-jurisdictional problems to which I have already referred. I will quote from the report on the confusion around responsibility. A seniors advocate, as proposed in our motion, would focus on this kind of inefficiency. It states:

The federal government has had ample time to clarify its own role and responsibilities through legislation and to develop policies to reduce interdepartmental confusion. It is time to take significant steps to rectify the interdepartmental fragmentation that contributes to the overall poor health status of First Nations and Inuit.

● (1655)

In addition, the legacy of residential schools also leaves elders with greater mental and physical health burdens than the average population for seniors. The Senate report on Mental Health indicates:

Inuit reviewing the Aboriginal Healing Foundation program see the need to expand it, to have it not only focus on residential schools and the negative impact of those schools relating to abuse but also the negative impact relating to language loss, cultural loss and the loss of parenting skills.

I want to speak specifically on access to government services. The first nations action plan on continuing care looks at the continuum of care for elders and highlights two important areas: the need for culturally appropriate services; and health and human resources training and capacity development.

For elders whose first language may not be one of Canada's official languages, finding care givers who can provide the specialized care in their own language is a real challenge, even for home care services; that is, even if elders have access to secure housing.

Aboriginal peoples in Canada face a huge housing shortage. The Senate report on Mental Health described the effect this housing shortage has on families. It stated:

In many regions, housing shortages have reached crisis proportions in our area. The mental impact on families so crowded that people must sleep on the floors and in shifts cannot be underestimated in our region. Homeless people drift from relative to relative to find a spot for the night.

That kind of overcrowded housing on reserves and lack of affordable housing off reserves means that many elders living in poverty do not have secure shelter. Again, from the Senate report on Mental Health, it stated:

Poverty, crime, violence, addictions, all categories of abuse, overcrowded housing, alienation, abandonment and suicide are all connected to mental and physical well-being. That interconnectivity of mental health issues is often forgotten

We would expect in this day and age that seniors, that elders in communities are given the respect that is their due. They have served their communities for decades. They have contributed in first nations communities and Inuit and Métis communities. They have contributed to the ongoing survival of the culture and of the language. They have provided guidance and teaching to the youth and others. In their declining years, we would expect that they would not have to worry about having enough to eat or having a decent place to live.

It is a shameful comment that in this day and age we are having to have this discussion.

I want to end my speech by returning to our motion and saying, again, how important it will be to have these rights enshrined in a charter to protect elders, to provide for elders and to celebrate elders and their achievements.

I urge all members of the House to join with the NDP to ensure that we have a seniors charter, to ensure that we enshrine those fundamental elements in a charter that say: yes, elders are an important part of our community; yes, we respect the work that they have done; and, yes, they deserve to live their declining years without any worries around those essential quality of life elements that so many of us take for granted.

Business of Supply

• (1700)

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take the NDP into NDP land, which is Saskatchewan. The reason we have so many Conservative MPs from Saskatchewan in the House is because seniors see that the policies of the NDP do nothing but cause their children to leave the province. Seniors in our province want their kids home. That is the first thing.

The second thing is our criminal justice policy. They want to be safe in their homes. The NDP policies simply do not work. People do not feel safe in their homes. There are home invasions. We have among the highest criminal rates in Canada.

The other problem that has arisen with the NDP is high taxation. That is why we welcome the 1% reduction in the GST. In our province GST is charged on PST, so things like telephone bills and others will benefit from our GST policy. Our five priorities went over well in Saskatchewan.

Although it is an interesting and lofty motion, and there is need to address seniors' needs, did the NDP go through the consultations we did? To be in the jurisdiction of the province to the point of dental and health benefits, I am a little concerned whether we could ever meet what this NDP motion asks.

I also would like to make a correction on the cancellation of the secretariat, which I have been hearing all afternoon. I am tired of hearing about it. We did not cancel the secretariat, which has been so widely proclaimed from the other side of the House.

Perhaps the NDP should think about consulting the provinces a little more before it puts a motion like this before the House. Then they should all come to Saskatchewan for a day and see our seniors. Because of the health districts amalgamating, if seniors have to go into a senior citizen's home or if they have to go for any kind of long term care, they are shipped across the health district.

These are 70, 80 and 90 year old people. They cannot stay in their home communities. There is no respite, no home care for them. This all has to do with provincial jurisdiction, which has not been delivered very well in the province of Saskatchewan, a supposedly rich province. We have both uranium and oil. However, we have an NDP government discouraging that and people are moving out of the province. We have a declining population. We are one of two provinces experiencing this.

I would like the NDP to think about some of their promises, on which they will be unable to deliver.

• (1705)

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, there was so much in that question, it is a challenge to answer it in the brief time I have available.

First, I would like to indicate to the member that we did extensive consultations from coast to coast to coast. We heard from seniors and senior advocates. We talked to some of our provincial counterparts about the importance of this issue. I believe the motion has been amended to talk about working with the provinces so we can work with our colleagues at various levels of government to ensure the services being provided are the services that are needed.

There are a couple of key points. First, people leaving a province points to the failure of developing an industrial strategy that addresses some of these critical issues in various provinces, in rural and remote areas as well. On criminal justice, it is one thing to talk about locking people up, but we also need to talk about prevention. We need adequate housing and adequate educational and social services programs to address some of the issues that are underlying some of the problems with the criminal justice system.

One of the things we never do is talk about how much it costs the system when we do not do something, when we do not have adequate programs in place for seniors. We are not talking about the cost of the health care system. We are not talking about the cost of the social services system. We are not talking about the cost of the justice system. When we do not factor those costs in, we do not get a true accounting of how a charter like this could be of benefit to seniors.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak on this motion by the New Democratic Party.

For many years, the New Democratic Party has made a point of making similar proposals designed to centralize decision making in Ottawa, whereas all social programs come under the jurisdiction of Quebec and the provinces. This is a commendable motion. Unfortunately, though, with this motion, the NDP is recommending interfering in the jurisdictions of Quebec and the provinces.

I would remind this House, as I said earlier and as I am wont to repeat, that health, education, social programs and income security are responsibilities of Quebec and the provinces. Since the early 1970s, Quebec has been asking that income security be managed by the Government of Quebec itself. In December 1995, the former Quebec finance minister said as follows:

Quebec considers the current federal funding framework for social programs unacceptable. It calls on the federal government to withdraw from funding social programs and to transfer to Quebec the tax points it uses to fund its initiatives in this area. This request is a concrete response to the problem of ongoing cuts in federal transfers.

All governments in Quebec, sovereignists or not, have always fought to preserve these jurisdictions, because we in Quebec are quite capable of making our own collective choices based on priorities which are different from the other provinces.

The Conservatives are great defenders of the industry knows best principle, while Liberals and the NDP defend the Ottawa knows best principle. We in the Bloc Québécois believe that Quebec and the provinces can do better, provided that they have the necessary resources.

I should point out that I will be sharing my speaking time with the distinguished member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup.

Business of Supply

In fact, I think that, before going down the road of invading the jurisdictions of Quebec and the provinces, the NDP should deal with problems that fall under federal jurisdiction, as the Bloc Québécois does. A case in point is the guaranteed income supplement for seniors.

The federal government has unfairly deprived, and still does, many Quebecers among the most vulnerable of our society of substantial income that is owed to them.

In December 2001, the report on the guaranteed income supplement was published by the Standing Committee on Human Rights and the Status of Disabled Persons. It stated that more than 270,000 Canadians, 68,000 Quebecers, and nearly 1,100 people in my riding of Gatineau were eligible for the guaranteed income supplement, but were not receiving anything from the federal government.

During the 38th Parliament, the Bloc Québécois introduced Bill C-301 to ensure full retroactivity for those who had been fleeced out of the guaranteed income supplement, instead of the retroactive payments currently limited to 11 months by the federal government.

I personally made this issue a priority in the last election campaign, but my Liberal, Conservative and NDP opponents in Gatineau never agreed to debate this issue with the Bloc. In fact, I made a commitment to the people of my riding to facilitate access for seniors eligible for the guaranteed income supplement.

The very next day—I made this announcement just recently—several people from the Outaouais region contacted either my constituency office or my office on the Hill. These were people from Gatineau, as well as from the ridings of Hull—Aylmer and Pontiac.

• (1710)

They were surprised that a member of Parliament was trying to help them. This speaks volumes about what they were used to, and still are used to, unfortunately, from the federalist MPs from the Outaouais.

At the Bloc Québécois, we know full well that it is the role of the member of Parliament to take steps on behalf of the public. We are elected by people in order to help them improve their living conditions and that includes seniors, as hon. members will agree.

I want to acknowledge the excellent work of an intern in my constituency office who helped us a great deal on this issue. I am talking about Marie-Pierre Baron-Courcy, a young political science student. She helped out by contacting all the players who work with or for seniors in the Gatineau riding, for example, senior citizens clubs, the regional Fédération de l'âge d'or du Québec group in my riding, soup kitchens. The purpose of this initiative was to find low-income seniors who were unfortunately unfamiliar with the program because the federal government had not done its job, which is to ensure that every senior, especially the least fortunate, knows about this program. I want to thank her because her efforts and her youthful enthusiasm showed us that this service to the people who built Quebec, to these people who paid taxes to Quebec and Canada their entire lives, could provide them with the help they are entitled to.

I will vote against this motion. As I said, overall it is worthy. However, it does not meet certain criteria that apply in this country. I

reject the NDP motion on the grounds that it interferes with Quebec's areas of jurisdiction. Like my Bloc Québécois colleagues, I am surprised by the NDP's approach, which yet again, despite honourable intentions, fails to recognize the existence of distinct areas of jurisdiction.

We would have rather seen the NDP address an issue that came up in debates in this House: the guaranteed income supplement. We did mention that.

Members of our party also talked about POWA, the program for older worker adjustment, which is a focal point of the Bloc Québécois' demands. Established in 1988, this program enabled eligible workers between the ages of 55 and 64 who lost their jobs because of major permanent layoffs to receive benefits. The program ended on March 31, 1997, under the Liberals, and has not been reintroduced since.

Since the program for older worker adjustment disappeared in March 1997, there has been no income support program specifically for older workers who lose their jobs because of mass layoffs or business closures. This often happens in single-industry areas. Often, both parents in one family work in these factories and suddenly find themselves with no income and no help for either one of them. That is shameful.

I hope that my statement will be seen as a message that the Bloc Québécois wants to help older people and does help them. If the NDP also wants to send a good message, it will join the Bloc Québécois in demanding increased federal transfer payments and the resolution of the fiscal imbalance. That would enable the provinces to make their own choices and, if they wish, set up a social system like Quebec's, which is a world-class model.

• (1715)

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would also like to congratulate the member for Gatineau on his speech. It shows us that there is no longer a party in this House that can truly and constantly defend the interests of Quebec and respect for its areas of jurisdiction.

Clearly the proposal by the NDP, which once again is very centralizing, does not respect the jurisdictions of Quebec and the provinces. As for the Liberal Party, we have had 13 years of their arrogance with respect to Quebec's jurisdiction. They did not even want to acknowledge the existence of a fiscal imbalance. Furthermore, we have a Conservative government that promised a different vision, but we have seen very quickly that old habits die hard, with interference in issues under the jurisdiction of Quebec and the provinces. There is talk of creating a Canadian securities commission, as well as establishing clauses, obligations to produce results in order to settle the issue of the fiscal imbalance.

This kind of decision comes up all the time. Actually there is no longer, in this Parliament or in Canada, a truly federalist party that believes provincial jurisdictions should be respected. There are only centralizing parties.

Business of Supply

I would like to ask my colleague from Gatineau what option remains for Quebeckers who do not share this vision of Canada, among Quebec's federalists. What could the Quebec people do then with a view to being able to make its own decisions and to take control of its destiny ultimately?

• (1720)

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Speaker, first of all to say it is a confederation is completely false. It is a federation. If it were a confederation, we would have an entity comprised of sovereign states, with each of these states having its own sovereignty and governing itself as it wishes, while having looser agreements with their partners.

In the present federation, where everyone is deemed equal, some are more equal than others. The Canadian government, when created, gave to the provinces powers that were the equivalent of municipal powers and retained the rest. Consequently, whatever did not exist in 1867 automatically falls under federal authority.

In provinces other than Quebec, for example, French schools and services for seniors have been done away with. In Ontario, in the 1990s, they even tried to close the Montfort hospital. The Speaker is very familiar with this situation as he comes from that area. At the time, the federal government said that it was a provincial matter and that it would not get involved, and that it thought that was too bad. All this was permitted in order to walk all over the French fact in this country called Canada.

Thus, we find ourselves with a centralist country. Social services, income—the right to a decent income—education and everything to do with health, are all provincial jurisdictions and represent the greatest costs for society. It is the provinces that assume these expenses and the federal government that has the money. Because of how power has been centralized, the money does not flow to the provinces.

In Quebec, because of our community spirit, we have built a society with models in order to ensure that we can meet the needs of our citizens, despite the federal government. Thank God that we have a distinct territory, a distinct state, a distinct language and a distinct culture. Only the Government of Canada does not recognize the distinct society of Quebec. Well, it is not complicated. We will soon have our country, my friends.

Until that time, we will ensure that every cent that is added to the federal piggy bank is returned to us, Quebeckers—that our invested share is paid back. That could be in a regional debate in which the Outaouais is entitled to 25% of jobs and federal offices, and to everything that is owed to us. Similarly, Quebec is entitled to take back what it has coming via the current tax system, since it is contributing.

Therefore, in the current debate on social services, we would like to demonstrate, once again, that in those areas where we have developed social projects that are important for our population, the money that is in Ottawa must be returned to Quebec for the projects we have implemented, in the spirit of cooperation. However, Canada has never really understood this, because cooperation means cooperation for Canada. This has never been done in terms of the needs expressed by Quebeckers. Quebec is not better than Canada, but it is certainly not worse. It wants the same.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your close attention, as I know you are a proud Franco-Ontarian. You fully understand that it is in Quebec that we will finally achieve respect for the French fact in all of North America. There will be a French-speaking country in North America.

For those who believe that Canada still has some element of the French fact, there will be two such elements: Quebec and Canada. It is in this spirit, in a debate such as this one, that we would like to share with the rest of the country our way of doing things in Quebec, to serve as a model.

Take, for example, the Quebec model for day care. The Conservatives sabotaged it, which is unfortunate. There are even Quebeckers in this government who sabotaged it because they no longer have the interest needed for this file. That is their problem. Later, they will have to answer to their constituents.

Thus, we want our fair share, no more, no less, and we will fight tooth and nail to make it happen.

• (1725)

Mr. Marcel Lussier (Brossard—La Prairie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to come back to the question of senior citizens. The matter of their low income has often been raised in the last election campaigns.

It was noted that about 60,000 people who were entitled to the guaranteed income supplement were misinformed about their rights. I would like to ask my colleague from Gatineau what he thinks of the retroactivity of the guaranteed income supplement to which senior citizens are entitled.

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Speaker, during the 38th Parliament, in the dying days of the crumbling Liberal government, the issue of the guaranteed income supplement, and retroactive payments to seniors in particular, could have been resolved. Had the Liberals agreed to what was put forward at third reading, the guaranteed income supplement and retroactive payments would no longer be a topic of discussion.

The federal government would have made sure that all low income seniors, the most disadvantaged in our society, automatically receive what they have been rightfully entitled to from age 65 on. For them, this would have meant between a few dollars and \$6,000 more a year, depending on the individual case.

Canada has a social insurance number system. Canada has an income tax system. Canada can trace someone wherever they are, but it fails to inform the poorest of society, namely seniors, of their eligibility for the guaranteed income supplement.

Those who found out too late should receive payments retroactive to age 65. This is outrageous. I know that you agree with me, Mr. Speaker. It makes no sense to treat people this way in a G-8 country which claims to be industrially advanced, a country with universities and a system that recognizes the importance of individuals.

The Bloc Québécois will pursue its efforts. Until such time as every last cent has been paid back to seniors and seniors have the money in their pockets, we will keep bringing the facts up and working to ensure that these people can get back what is rightfully theirs.

Business of Supply

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): I would like the member for Gatineau's attention for a moment.

Does he plan to share his time with another member?

Mr. Richard Nadeau: Mr. Speaker, I am sharing my time with the member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, as I mentioned in my speech.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): In that case, resuming debate.

The hon. member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup.

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak on this issue because the status of seniors deserves the attention of the House of Commons. In that sense, those who introduced the motion deserve recognition for their efforts. I have read the text of the motion, and it seems to me that many of the items mentioned fall under provincial jurisdiction. In the end, we cannot support this motion because it would mean spending twice as much money—money that could otherwise be allocated directly to seniors.

That said, today it is important to recognize the contribution seniors have made to history in Quebec and Canada, and to recognize that the old age pension plan was a good social program introduced years ago in Canada. I remember that when I was a child, seniors did not have enough money left at the end of the month. Life expectancy was shorter. We had those kinds of problems.

A good program was put in place, but over the years there were major problems of fairness. Permit me to pay tribute to Marcel Gagnon, our former member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain, who is now retired. During his term of office, he paid particular attention to the issue of the guaranteed income supplement. We came to realize that tens of thousands of seniors were not receiving the guaranteed income supplement. Marcel Gagnon took up his staff, like a pilgrim, and set out on a tour of virtually every seniors' association and seniors' community in Quebec so that these people could be informed. He also mobilized the members of the Bloc. He did sufficient work that after two months the human resources department decided to put out leaflets. The department decided to seek people out as well, because it realized that certain persons were doing the work that it should normally be doing itself.

It was not that public servants were not doing their job: this was the result of choices made by the Liberal government in 1994 and 1995. You will recall that it was absolutely necessary to fight the deficit, to make cuts everywhere. Employment insurance was slashed in every possible way, in terms of both eligibility and in the amounts of the benefits. The same thing was done with seniors. The former finance minister—who became Prime Minister and was defeated in the last election—even proposed replacing the old age security pension with another program that would have been very expensive for every individual. That was shelved because of substantial pressure from seniors. I want to congratulate Marcel Gagnon, thank him for the work he has done on this, and also let him know the gratitude that we owe him.

Today there is one point which has not been resolved, and that is the retroactivity of the guaranteed income supplement. We have

completed our tax returns and sent them in. If the government is not satisfied with what they contain and finds that the amount declared is not enough, it can go back five years, I believe, to check if things were done correctly. However, things are different when it owes money to seniors. I could give the example of a lady of 70, 75, or maybe even 78 years of age. Her husband died. The way things were done at the time, it was the husband who took care of all things financial. Suddenly the wife inherited this situation which she knew nothing about. For a year or two, she received no guaranteed income supplement, at age 78 or 79. We found this woman. The Bloc helped her recover her guaranteed income supplement, but its retroactive application is 11 months maximum.

Often people are owed four or five years of retroactivity. This would allow them to live out their days in dignity. There was no indication of this in the government's actions and no indication of it in this motion either. This should be put forward. This should be proposed. We are one of the most developed countries in the world. A society should be judged on how it treats the least fortunate. We should not look just at GDP, but at how a country gives the least fortunate the support they need. More effort needs to be made to that effect and we are just not seeing it.

An effort should be made. We have to take another look at the basket that determines the inflation rate and the consumer price index, on which increases to old age pensions are based. The CPI, the consumer price index, gives us the average situation. Seniors have very specific expenses. They need more drugs and special equipment. They need to buy accessories to be able to get into their bathtub without breaking a hip; they have to use taxis more often than other people because they no longer have a driver's licence. All these things represent a cost and I think this should be included in the calculation of the consumer price index, especially for seniors. This does not exist and we should go in that direction.

There are people who receive regular increases to their old age pension and their supplement. However, these increases never cover what they have been paying for the last three or four years because everything cost them more.

● (1730)

There is a need for action here. The government has to listen to organizations such as golden age clubs, clubs for people 50 and older.

I am a proud member of the club in La Pocatière, which breaks through a lot of social isolation. It lets people get together and enjoy themselves. It is very worthwhile, and I think that these kinds of movements and organizations should be encouraged and should have access to the resources they need to serve seniors. This is a very active contribution to our society.

In rural communities, many people become pillars of volunteerism in our society at 60 or 65. There must be dedicated volunteers in urban communities as well, but I am less familiar with that environment. Often these are people who help children learn to read in volunteer clubs. There are hundreds of examples of such activities, and they deserve to be recognized.

Business of Supply

The motion before us, which is full of goodwill, would require substantial investment in bureaucracy. A lot of spending would be duplicated. The motion refers to a secretariat; Quebec already has one. It refers to other similar types of spending that are already happening.

This is another characteristic of seniors: they worked hard, they earned their money and they hate waste. To understand this, one just had to listen to what people in the golden age clubs had to say last year about the sponsorship scandal. The people at these clubs were really angry. Long-standing Liberals wanted nothing more to do with the party, because they felt as though they had been scammed by their own people. In short, seniors do not like waste, and they would not like to see infrastructure being duplicated for them or more money being spent for them, but not reaching them directly.

I think that seniors would be best served by a good indexing system, an adequate guaranteed income supplement. As well, people must be able to have this supplement, and if they did not receive it at the appropriate time, it must be paid to them retroactively so that they can move forward. This is an important concern.

For example, the Fédération des Clubs de l'Âge d'Or de l'Est du Québec is organizing a two-day seminar for seniors this fall. I invite everyone to participate, those aged 50 and older, but also younger people. There will be workshops for people of all ages. It is important that people aged 25, 30, and 35 know what those aged 55, 60 and 65 are experiencing. This will help to discourage selfish behaviour and a lack of interest in seniors' problems. Mutual solidarity can only be advantageous. Such action will allow us to achieve positive results.

I believe we need to break a stereotype that exists about seniors: that everyone lives very comfortably with their old age pension. The reality is quite the opposite. Many women live a little longer than men. These people who live alone, who have rent to pay, often find themselves in difficult personal situations. One would have to visit a rooming house to see how things really are.

Our focus should be on finding a way, especially if the federal government has a surplus of \$12 billion, to redistribute the wealth in our society, so as to give a little more to those who have given their lives to our society. This is the least we can do as a sign of respect, in order to ensure them a decent existence in their later years.

● (1735)

Mr. Richard Nadeau (Gatineau, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the following question of the distinguished member who is quite familiar with the situation: what does he think we could say to the Conservative government so that it would show respect to seniors in the matter of the guaranteed income supplement? The current government seems somewhat at a loss.

I know that there are parliamentary secretaries present—at least one—and a minister, who could listen carefully and put forward some plans to respect the seniors of Quebec and Canada.

Mr. Paul Crête: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from the Outaouais, a dedicated sovereigntist and a symbol of the Bloc Québécois contribution, since it arrived here, to defending the interests of Quebec.

The Outaouais is not an area where the majority are in favour of sovereignty. Significant progress has been made and the type of action by the Bloc Québécois means that today we have a member from the Outaouais who represents the interests of Quebec, as desired by Quebeckers. He is not a representative of Ottawa in the Outaouais; he is a representative of the Outaouais in Ottawa. I wish to thank him.

Insofar as the elderly are concerned, the best thing that the government could do regarding the guaranteed income supplement would be to take a photograph of the reality and make it public. There are still 63,000 senior citizens who should receive the guaranteed income supplement but do not. That must change. We should be able to see from this photograph whether the government is making things as easy as possible for the elderly or whether they have to fill out forms year after year and re-do their calculations. Nowadays, calculations can be done automatically in many fields. Help is provided so that people can have computerized services. And yet, no automatic calculations are done for these people. They are not sent a letter telling them that the calculations have been done and they are entitled to a certain supplement. Efforts could be made as well to check whether that suits them.

Someone who is getting the minimum old age pension and would receive an additional \$100 could talk things over with his or her family to see whether it makes much sense.

The government should table figures and report on the situation to the relevant parliamentary committee. The parliamentarians on this committee could then decide what to do.

At the present time, the situation is still murky and hard to follow. Human Resources and Social Development Canada now provides information so that people can get their guaranteed income supplement. This is thanks to the efforts of the Bloc Québécois and, more especially, Mr. Marcel Gagnon. But more needs to be done. The current situation should be explained, for example, that this many million people receive the supplement but this many tens of thousands still do not, even though they are entitled to it. The search for them must continue.

There should be some inter-generational information. People who are 50 or 55 years of age should be asked to check whether their parents are getting what is due to them. The elderly are often very proud and reluctant to say that they are short of money. Maybe the money they need is what the federal government already owes them.

The best thing would still be to give them what is owed and make it retroactive. If the federal government decided to give money to everyone we have found over the last two, three or four years, we could then say that it had done a good job.

● (1740)

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I have listened to everyone talk about seniors. It is true that they are our best asset. They help out a great deal, especially with children, and are involved in literacy initiatives.

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has a surplus of over \$4.3 billion. I would like my hon. colleague to tell us what tangible measures this government could propose to help house seniors.

Business of Supply

Mr. Paul Crête: Mr. Speaker, the CMHC is not a private enterprise but a crown corporation. It should invest a significant portion of its surplus—totalling several billion dollars—in affordable housing so that seniors can be decently housed. We should also provide older workers with a program so that they may have a decent and adequate retirement when they can no longer find work.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Resuming debate. The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance has 20 minutes.

Ms. Diane Ablonczy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate this opportunity to respond to the motion by the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain. I wholeheartedly agree that Canada's seniors deserve our support, but frankly, I am a bit surprised by the hon. member's motion. Canada's support for seniors is one of the major success stories of government policy in the postwar era.

In fact, Canada is unique among the OECD countries in terms of the effect—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Mississauga South is rising on a point of order, but before he does, I would like to correct myself. Although the parliamentary secretary has 20 minutes, we must interrupt at 5:54 to put the question, so the parliamentary secretary has maybe 15 minutes and not 20. Was this the point of order?

Mr. Paul Szabo: Mr. Speaker, I wanted to ensure that the member was able to get to her real points. I wanted to make the same point.

Ms. Diane Ablonczy: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his consideration in this matter. It is good to have clarity.

Canada is unique among OECD countries in terms of the effectiveness and sustainability of our retirement income system. We are proud of that and rightly so.

Canada's approach to ensuring income security among seniors has been built on a multi-pillared foundation of a diversified retirement income system based on a mix of public and private pensions.

First, there is the basic income support through old age security pensions and the guaranteed income supplement. These benefits ensure a minimum level of income to over 4.2 million Canadian seniors, providing them with almost \$32 billion each and every year.

There are earnings related pensions and insurance benefits provided under the Canada pension plan and Quebec pension plan. According to the chief actuary of the Canada pension plan, the CPP is financially sustainable. It will be there for seniors for at least the next 75 years. This is a solid plan that our seniors can count on.

In addition, both the old age security and the Canada pension plan are already fully indexed to inflation. This ensures that the value of public pension benefits are not eroded by inflation.

In addition to this and bearing in mind the motion we are debating today, and also recognizing that federal surpluses in excess of \$3 billion may arise, the Government of Canada has indicated its openness to consider options to allocate unplanned surpluses and in particular, to discuss with the provinces and territories the possibility of introducing legislation authorizing the allocation of a portion of

unanticipated surpluses at fiscal year end to the Canada pension plan and the Quebec pension plan.

This would allow unplanned surpluses to be used for the future benefit of Canadians to improve intergenerational equity. There is not just one group in society for whom we need to think about fairness, but all segments of society, and possibly allow for lower contribution rates in the medium term. It is always nice to have lower taxes.

The third pillar of Canada's retirement income system is tax deferred private retirement savings, which include registered pension plans and RRSPs. These plans are important because they provide Canadians with real incentives to save for their retirement and to help bridge the gap between public pension benefits and their retirement income goals.

I would like to expand for a moment on this third pillar, because the protection of pension benefits is an important issue to the federal government. Canada has a solid regulatory framework in place to ensure that the rights and interests of pension plan members, of retirees and their beneficiaries are protected. This new government is committed to further improving the regulation of private pension plans to ensure that these rights and interests continue to be protected.

Based on responses received from a consultation process launched last year and in light of the funding challenges facing some private defined benefit pension plans, the federal government has recently proposed measures that will help re-establish full funding of these federally regulated defined benefit pension plans to re-establish full funding in an orderly fashion while providing safeguards for promised pension benefits.

We are determined that seniors and those who will become seniors will be able to count on this income support, on these savings, on these programs in their retirement years. We will not just sit back and see what develops. Our government will continue to actively monitor the issue of defined benefit pension plans to ensure that these plans continue to be viable. The government will therefore consider any further action that becomes necessary.

● (1745)

This new government is working to ensure that our retirement systems are sustainable for the future. However, this government is doing so much more to help Canadians, particularly low income Canadians, which includes low income senior citizens.

First, we are reducing the goods and services tax by one percentage point as of July 1, Canada Day. This is a tax reduction for all Canadians, including those whose incomes are too low to pay any income tax. This will provide immediate tax relief starting July 1, 2006. We have also committed to a further tax relief by reducing the GST a further percentage point in a future budget.

Second, budget 2006 reduces the lowest personal income tax rate from its currently legislated rate of 16% down to 15.5%. As well, the budget includes a basic personal amount that is tax free so that it grows each year and remains above currently legislated levels for 2005, 2006 and 2007.

Private Members' Business

Budget 2006 contains a measure of particular interest to Canadians receiving private pension income. Budget 2006 doubles the maximum amount of tax free pension income that can be claimed under the pension income credit, now up to \$2,000. This measure, effective for this year and subsequent taxation years, will benefit nearly 2.7 million taxpayers receiving eligible pension income. That is a lot of seniors and a lot of future seniors. What is more, it will remove approximately 85,000 pensioners from the tax rolls.

This is the first time in more than 20 years that the pension income credit amount has been increased. It was originally introduced as a \$1,000 deduction in 1975.

Many seniors are regular users of our public transit systems and to encourage public transit usage, budget 2006 will provide a tax credit on the purchase cost of monthly public transit passes or passes of a longer duration. This is once again effective on Canada Day. A lot of good things are happening on Canada Day. This measure will encourage public transit use by providing millions of dollars and will benefit approximately two million Canadians who make a sustained commitment to use this environmentally friendly mode of transportation. All transit users, including seniors, will qualify.

In summing up, seniors have made Canada what it is today. Seniors deserve, not only our respect for this work, but our support to allow them to continue to enjoy their later lives after a lifetime of contributing to our society. This new government has taken additional action to provide that support. We are committed to ensuring that programs and services for Canada's senior population continue to be fair and help meet their needs.

• (1750)

[Translation]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): It being 5:54 p.m., pursuant to order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the business of supply are deemed put, a recorded division is deemed demanded and deferred to Tuesday, June 20, 2006, at the end of the oral question period.

[English]

It being 5:54 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

PERFLUOROOCANE SULFONATE VIRTUAL ELIMINATION ACT

Hon. Maria Minna (Beaches—East York, Lib.) moved that Bill C-298, An Act to add perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS) to the Virtual Elimination List under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

She said: Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to be here today to talk about this bill which represents an important step in protecting the health of Canadians and our environment. Bill C-298 seeks the elimination from our environment of a chemical that poses a threat to

the health of Canadians. This chemical, PFOS, is currently not regulated in Canada in any way.

First, allow me to explain briefly what PFOS is and what it is used for, then I will say why we need to eliminate it from our lives and from our environment.

PFOS is one of a larger class of chemicals known as PFCs. These chemicals are mainly used in consumer products for their non-stick, stain repellent and water repellent properties. PFOS itself is used mostly as a stain repellent in various consumer products, as well as in certain industrial applications.

Consumer products that may contain PFOS include rugs, carpets, fabric, upholstery, clothing, food packaging and certain industrial and household cleaners. Other applications include firefighting foams, hydraulic fluids, carpet spot removers, mining and oil well applications and metal plating processes, such as chrome plating.

The most famous application of PFOS was in the Scotchguard products manufactured by 3M. 3M voluntarily stopped using PFOS in 2000 at the urging of the U.S. EPA, citing the health and environmental dangers posed by the chemical.

I will turn now to the question of why we need to eliminate PFOS from our environment and from our lives. The risks posed by PFOS has been examined by a number of countries and by international bodies as well. They have all come to essentially the same conclusions: PFOS is a threat to human health and the environment.

Most of the health studies we have on the effects of PFOS deal with animals. In animals PFOS has been found to cause breast cancer, liver cancer and thyroid cancer and is known to harm the pancreas, the brain and the immune system.

PFOS is more persistent in the environment than DDT and PCBs. It is quite an awful piece of work. It is also persistent in the human body. Even if we could eliminate PFOS from our environment immediately, it would take eight years on average for our bodies to get rid of half of the PFOS in our systems.

In 2000, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said:

that continued manufacture and use of PFOS represents an unacceptable technology that should be eliminated to protect human health and the environment from potentially severe long term consequences.

Those are strong words.

In April 2004, Environment Canada and Health Canada completed their own assessments of PFOS. They came to essentially the same conclusion. There are four basic questions that we need to ask when deciding whether a chemical poses a sufficient risk to human health and the environment that it should be regulated.

Private Members' Business

First, is the substance inherently toxic, that is, does it pose a health risk to humans or wildlife? Second, does it persist for long periods of time in the environment without breaking down into harmless compounds? Three, does it bioaccumulate, in other words, does it become more concentrated as it moves up the food chain? Four, is it used widely enough or in such a manner that there is a serious risk of human exposure?

PFOS meets all of these criteria. In its April 2004 assessment, Environment Canada concluded that PFOS is persistent, bioaccumulative and inherently toxic. Similarly the U.S. EPA stated that, "PFOS appears to combine persistence, bioaccumulation and toxicity properties to an extraordinary degree".

As to the fourth factor, the risk of exposure, we know that virtually all Canadians and Canadian wildlife are being exposed to PFOS. I will read briefly from the summary published by Environment Canada and Health Canada in the *Canada Gazette*. It states:

PFOS has been detected throughout the world, including in areas distant from sources, and in virtually all fish and wildlife sampled in the northern hemisphere, including Canadian wildlife in remote sites, far from sources or manufacturing facilities of PFOS and its precursors.

● (1755)

This suggests, not only that PFOS is pervasive in our environment, but that it travels very long distances once it enters the environment. As such, it is not only a risk for those using products that contain PFOS, the risk of exposure affects everyone.

What about human exposure? We have data on that as well. New and emerging evidence suggests that human exposure to PFOS is pervasive in Canada. Environmental Defence Canada has conducted two studies in which it tested Canadians from across the country to see if they had PFOS and a number of other chemicals in their bodies. This type of study is called body load testing.

The first report published in November 2005 tested 11 adults from across Canada. It found that all of them had PFOS in their bodies. The second, published just a couple of weeks ago, looked at members of five families in various regions of the country, parents, children and grandparents. Once again, all study participants had PFOS in their bodies.

The second report also revealed something new and very troubling. The concentration levels in children were higher than those in their parents. This means that dealing with PFOS is a serious and urgent question of children's health. Children may in fact be more vulnerable to the effects of toxic chemicals like PFOS because their bodies are growing and developing rapidly. The fact that they have higher levels of PFOS in their systems means that we need to act now, not later.

This all adds up to the fact that PFOS poses a danger to Canadians' health and the environment. I doubt that we will hear anyone dispute this fact in the House today. Among those I have talked to so far, everyone seems to agree that PFOS poses an unacceptable risk. The question is what we should do about it. What action should we take?

I mentioned earlier that Environment Canada and Health Canada completed a draft assessment of PFOS in April 2004. On the basis of that assessment, the ministers of these departments made two

proposals for action. These were published in the *Canada Gazette* on October 2, 2004.

The first recommendation was that PFOS be added to the list of toxic substances under CEPA which is found in schedule 1. The second recommendation was the implementation of virtual elimination of PFOS. This is precisely what Bill C-298 proposes to do. It requires the virtual elimination of PFOS.

Virtual elimination has a specific meaning under CEPA, which is laid out in clause 65 of the bill. It means that the substance cannot be released into the environment at any level or concentration that cannot be accurately measured using sensitive but routine sampling and analytical methods. Essentially, the chemicals should not be entering the environment at any level that is detectable using the best commonly available measurement techniques. As I understand it, virtual elimination, as its name suggests, is a mechanism that is intended to eliminate harmful substances like PFOS from our environment.

If Environment Canada and Health Canada have already recommended the virtual elimination of PFOS, why do we need a bill? There are two reasons.

Given the mounting evidence about the risk posed to Canada by PFOS, we must ensure that our response is speedy and we must ensure that it is adequate. Neither of these things is assured if we simply continue down the normal regulatory path.

In terms of the response being speedy, allow me to outline what moving forward with the normal regulatory process might look like.

As I understand it, the next step would normally be another publication in the *Canada Gazette*, accompanied by a recommendation to the governor in council. In the *Canada Gazette* posting, the ministers would outline the process they intended to follow to develop a regulation or instrument to address the risk posed by PFOS. After that, they would have two years to actually propose a regulation or an instrument. Once they have made this proposal, they would another 18 months to review feedback on what they have proposed.

After 18 months, if no material or substantive changes are required, the regulation or instrument would be published. By my account, this means that if we were to take the next step tomorrow, we might be a little over three years away from an actual regulation to address the threat of PFOS.

● (1800)

More than two years after the initial assessment was completed, the prospect of waiting another three or four years before anything gets done to address the threat posed by PFOS is simply unconscionable. There are ways that the ministers could choose to act more expeditiously.

These are outlined in the bill as well. I do not want to speculate on what path the ministers might choose to take, but the bottom line is that for the sake of our children and for the sake of our environment, we need to act now, not later.

In my opinion, this bill is the right way to do that because it ensures that not only is the response timely, it is also adequate.

Private Members' Business

It is the nature of the regulatory process that until we have a final regulation, we do not actually know what the response will be. Without knowing specifically what the minister intends to recommend, I cannot comment on whether or not it would be an adequate response. I can say that experience has taught us that merely adding a chemical to the list of toxic substances does not guarantee significant action. In fact, it does not guarantee any action at all.

This bill avoids that problem. If Parliament were to pass this bill, they would know what kind of response they would get to the threat posed by PFOS. They would know it would be adequate and they would know it would be carried out in a timely fashion.

Other countries have already taken action to protect their citizens and their environment from exposure to PFOS. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of PFOS in 2000, with the exception of a few very specific applications. Other countries have since moved to ban or severely restrict the use of PFOS. Sweden has proposed a global ban on the substance under the Stockholm convention on persistent organic pollutants, sometimes called the POPs treaty.

The POPs committee is now moving forward with its consideration of PFOS to decide if it should be included under the Stockholm treaty. A draft report prepared for the committee in May of this year found that PFOS meets all of the criteria for inclusion. The report concludes with the following statement:

Due to the harmful POP properties and risks related to its possible continuing production and use, global action is warranted to eliminate the pollution caused by PFOS.

Incidentally, we also learned from this report that Environment Canada and Health Canada have revised their ecological and human health assessments on PFOS and that the revised versions should be publicly available soon. I look forward to seeing these.

Sweden is right. PFOS belongs on this list of persistent organic pollutants banned under the Stockholm treaty, but in the meantime we need to deal with it here at home. We simply cannot allow Canada to lag behind when it comes to protecting human health and the environment. We must act now, not later, to protect Canadians from exposure to PFOS. That is the objective of this bill, and I hope that all parties and all members will support it.

• (1805)

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague across the way for her concern about this chemical. I have a couple of questions for her.

First, this product has not been allowed to be sold in Canada since 2002. It is in the process. CEPA is dealing with it, basically to get this banned. My worry is, and I think all Canadians and my hon. colleague across the way should be concerned, that this private member's bill could actually hamper the efforts of CEPA.

Second, why, after the 13 years that her party was in government, was the thing not banned in that time? I would like that answered. Why does she not just let the CEPA process work because this bill could actually damage that? I would like to hear her comments on that.

Hon. Maria Minna: Mr. Speaker, I find it strange how this could possibly hamper the process.

First, with respect to the previous government, the regulatory process is very complex and it takes a long time. I have outlined in fact why it takes a long time.

Second, there is new evidence which demonstrates that PFOS is a real problem in the Canadian context. We need to act now, rather than later.

When we put together the new evidence, as I said earlier, a great deal of time is taken to actually address the situation. I do not believe that we can wait that long.

Third, my understanding is that CEPA is not looking to ban the product. As I understand it, it is looking to list it, which is not the exact same thing. It can be listed as a toxic substance, but that in itself does not deal with the issue nor does it take it out of the environment entirely.

When I was the minister responsible for international cooperation, I was responsible at the time to deal with the issue of POPs, persistent organic pollutants. As part of Canada's response to the environment on the international scene, I was responsible to work with POPs in developing countries.

The reason that Canada was involved in investing money with developing countries to eliminate the use of persistent organic pollutants is because they are landing in northern Canada. We have a very direct interest in this issue. The reason why POPs are banned is because they are persistent and they stay in the environment. They are bioaccumulative.

Canada was very aggressively involved with developing countries with regard to the elimination of POPs, first because they were bad for everyone in the world, but also because they were landing in our north.

Exactly the same thing is happening with PFOS. In fact, as I said earlier, this substance is even more persistent than some of the other ones. PFOS is harder to get rid of in the environment and in the system. It takes decades and maybe never. PFOS affects children more than it affects adults. Quite frankly, I do not see how a bill that is addressing a very serious issue could hamper the work that CEPA is doing.

I presume and I know that the review certainly can integrate whatever decision the House makes. Quite frankly, Parliament can make decisions that are over and above whatever CEPA is doing. I do not see how that would hamper it.

As I said, this substance is serious. It is bad. In Stockholm, the United States, even the company 3M has stopped using it. In fact, Environment Canada in 2004 stated that it should be quasi-listed and virtually eliminated. Now we are talking about listing it as a toxin. That is not sufficient.

I think that this substance is bad for children, bad for our environment, and bad for the country. We should do as other countries have already done and continue to do. It should be listed.

Private Members' Business

•(1810)

Mr. Mark Warawa (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would also like to begin by thanking the member for her work on this file and her obvious concern for the environment.

The government does not support Bill C-298, her private member's bill, dealing with the chemical substance perfluorooctane sulfonate, known as PFOS.

Both the ministers of environment and health have already conducted a draft assessment on the risks of PFOS that it may pose to both humans and the environment, and the member acknowledged that in her speech. The ministers will also follow up with proposed actions to manage identified risks.

The government has an open and transparent process under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, known as CEPA 99, to assess and manage the risks posed by substances such as PFOS. Under the current legislation in CEPA 99 substances come forward for a scientific risk assessment. The risks of the scientific assessment are then used to initiate appropriate risk management actions.

As members of the House are aware, CEPA 99 was enacted to protect the environment and human health. As I said earlier, the departments of environment and health have been actively evaluating the science of PFOS in order to make sound decisions concerning the risks that PFOS may pose and the most suitable risk management actions to take if required.

As part of the science assessment the departments consider all available scientific information concerning PFOS and follow an open and transparent assessment process as required under CEPA 99.

Officials from Environment Canada and Health Canada have drafted a screening risk assessment of PFOS. As part of the process a draft assessment was released in October 2004 for review by a large number of scientific experts in the field. It was formally released to solicit public comment.

In releasing the draft assessment the ministers gave notice of their intent to recommend that PFOS be added to the list of toxic substances under CEPA 99. All comments received on the proposal and assessment were carefully considered and incorporated into the assessment where appropriate.

The revised assessment concludes that PFOS is a persistent biocumulative and inherently toxic substance in the environment. Furthermore, the revised assessment concludes that PFOS is entering the environment in concentrations that may have a harmful effect on the environment. These conclusions have not changed from the initial draft assessment. Canada's conclusions are also in agreement with the assessment decisions and actions of other countries.

The revised assessment states that PFOS meets criteria established under section 64 of CEPA 99. In examining the risks posed by this substance to humans, it was concluded that concentrations of PFOS do not currently constitute a danger in Canada to human life or health. The final science risk assessment should be published shortly.

I would like to now provide some context on what PFOS is, its use and its potential impact on the Canadian environment. PFOS has

been used primarily for oil, grease and water repellants, specifically used on rugs, carpets, fabric, upholstery and food packaging. The hon. member mentioned some of those. PFOS has also some specialized uses such as firefighting foams and hydraulic fluids.

It should be emphasized that PFOS is not manufactured in Canada. PFOS is not in the Canadian marketplace and is largely unavailable to the average Canadian consumer. Emerging science shows that PFOS is found around the globe in the environment and wildlife.

Transported over long distances by air movements and ocean currents, PFOS is found in remote regions such as the Arctic. Some of the highest concentrations measured in the world are in polar bears in the Canadian Arctic. Leading Canadian scientists have spearheaded this groundbreaking research.

PFOS has been found in many fish, fish-eating birds and Arctic mammals such as polar bears. It has been shown to accumulate in animal tissue and concentrating in increasing amounts up the food chain.

•(1815)

These concentrations are at or approaching the levels known to cause harm to wildlife. Harmful effects can include regressing growth in birds and aquatic invertebrates, liver and thyroid effects in mammals, lethality in fish and changes to biodiversity. Concentrations of PFOS in polar bears are higher than any other known persistent organic pollutants, otherwise known as POPs.

Therefore, as noted previously, the ministers gave notice that based on available information, they propose adding PFOS to the list of toxic substances.

The problem with Bill C-298 is that it would disrupt the process that is currently under way to develop a comprehensive risk management strategy. This proposed risk management strategy will ensure the protection of the health of Canadians and their environment. Under the existing legislation and regulatory framework, the Department of the Environment will soon propose a risk management strategy, in consultation with stakeholders, to address PFOS and to ensure the protection of the environment.

Furthermore, the department's proposed risk management actions will be consistent with international actions and activities on this substance. For example, the United States has established restrictions to control new uses of PFOS. The United Kingdom has proposed restrictions on the supply and use of PFOS. Sweden has filed a proposal to the European Commission for a national ban on PFOS. The European Union has proposed market instruments and use restrictions of PFOS in 2006.

Canada is engaged in multinational efforts to address the risks posed by this substance. For example, Canada is a signatory of a number of relevant international agreements. We acknowledge the nomination of PFOS to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe protocol on long range transboundary air pollution, and its nomination to the Stockholm convention on persistent organic pollutants.

Private Members' Business

Canada will continue to engage our international partners in global action on PFOS to complement our domestic policy. Supporting these efforts is critical to addressing the long range transport of PFOS into the Canadian environment.

In conclusion, we do not want to jeopardize the assessment process as it nears completion for PFOS. It is clear that under its current powers and authorities the government is committed to the control of toxic substances and pollution prevention. The necessary steps are being taken to further the continued protection of the Canadian environment, particularly the Arctic ecosystems, and to minimize impacts.

● (1820)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it gives me great joy today to rise and speak to Bill C-298, presented by the hon. member for Beaches—East York. This bill requires that the Minister of the Environment add perfluorooctane sulfonate, more commonly known as PFOS, to the Virtual Elimination List under subsection 65(2) of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, passed by this House in 1999, and to do so within nine months of the enactment of the bill.

The minister, under the bill tabled by the member, must also make regulations prescribing the quantity or concentration of that substance that may be released into the environment, either alone or in combination with any other substance, in order to achieve the virtual elimination of the substance.

I would first like to recall that virtual elimination, in the context of discharging a toxic substance into the environment as the result of human activity, means the ultimate reduction of the quantity or concentration of a substance released into the environment to below the level of quantification specified by the ministers in the list contemplated in section 65 of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.

What is PFOS? This substance is such that its salts and precursors belong to a broader category of fluorinated chemical substances. The term PFOS may refer to any of these forms, that is, anions, acids or salts.

PFOS and its precursors are used mainly to manufacture water-repellent and soil-repellent agents on surfaces and papers, such as rugs and carpets, fabrics and upholstery, and food packaging, as well as specialized chemical products, such as carpet stain removers, surface-active agents, such as detergents, frothing agents, wetting agents, dispersing agents and emulsifying agents for mines and oil wells.

As some of my colleagues have indicated, in Canada, there is no known production of compounds, of which PFOS is one. Some 600 tonnes of compounds were imported to Canada from 1997 to 2000, PFOS representing only a very small part of this total.

What are the effects of PFOS? First of all, according to the available data, PFOS penetrates the environment in quantities or in conditions that may immediately or in the long term have a harmful effect—and I stress the word harmful—on the environment or its biological diversity. The presence of this product in the environment

is chiefly due to human activities, and these inorganic substances do not occur naturally in the environment.

As we consider this bill introduced by my hon. colleague, it should be pointed out that, in 2004, the government published in part I of the *Canada Gazette* a notice of its intention to add PFOS to the list of toxic substances and recommend its virtual elimination. The notice invited comments from the public for a 60 day period.

To date, however, schedule 1 of the Environmental Protection Act has yet to be amended to include PFOS. One might think that, at the time, the government heard from industry representatives who came forward to ask that the government defer adding it to the list. I want to stress that it is very likely that industrial sectors intervened with both the previous government and the current one. The latter announced today that it opposed the bill introduced by the former minister.

Is it normal not to be further along after two years?

● (1825)

One has to wonder if this long delay is due to a lack of will on the part of the administration, which is certainly under pressure by the industries concerned to delay designating PFOS as a toxic substance. Should, however, this be a standard delay due to a ponderous democracy, it would be totally unacceptable. It is indeed unacceptable to take nearly two years to restrict the use of a substance proven to be harmful. If the blame lies with the bureaucracy, we will have to do something about that at the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development, to ensure that, once they have been assessed as harmful, substances become regulated without delay.

In fact, the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development is currently reviewing the Environmental Protection Act and, as part of our work, we will certainly have to hear evidence from groups, both environmental and industrial ones. We will also have to ensure that the process can be sped up from the moment that a substance has been declared harmful.

As the parliamentary secretary said, high concentrations of PFOS have been found in certain wildlife species. For example, it has been found in polar bears, elsewhere in the world in some kinds of fish, in Japan and the Netherlands, and in the environment. The documents provided by Environment Canada show that the highest ambient concentration recorded was higher than the threshold concentration, which suggests possible effects on aquatic organisms, birds and mammals. Minimal concentrations were found in the livers of wildlife species in remote parts of the Canadian Arctic, including mink, common loon, seal, brook trout, Arctic fox and polar bear. This is the reality. Some toxic effects have been discovered, and departmental specialists have found concentrations in aquatic organisms.

In my final minute, I would like to say that we will support the bill introduced by the member today. We will support it because, among other things, a study released in 2005 by Environmental Defence showed that high concentrations have been found in humans. Eleven volunteers agreed to take part in a number of studies and evaluations.

Private Members' Business

Given the toxic effect on aquatic environments, and given existing concentrations, even in humans, we will support this bill and we hope it will pass speedily given the current situation. We will most likely be examining this issue during our review of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, which is currently before the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

• (1830)

[*English*]

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak tonight to Bill C-298, a private member's bill to add perfluorooctane sulfonate, PFOS, to the virtual elimination list under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act.

This substance is commonly used in many fabrics, usually as a stain repellent. Recent tests have suggested it causes organ damage and problems in development. These tests prompted the USEPA to ban the substance.

PFOS is both persistent and bioaccumulative, according to the Canadian Environmental Protection Act criteria, more persistent than DDT or PCBs.

If we were to eliminate PFOS today, it would take each of us an average of eight years to get rid of half of this chemical in our bodies. In the meantime, our bodies continue to accumulate PFOS.

My colleague from Skeena—Bulkley Valley also has a private member's bill before the House to eliminate phthalates, another chemical, in children's toys, cosmetics and medical devices.

There is extensive scientific literature reporting adverse effects of phthalates, particularly on children, including early puberty in girls, premature delivery of babies, impaired sperm quality and sperm damage in men, genital defects, and reduced testosterone production in boys and testicular cancer.

The EU has banned three of the listed phthalates in children's toys and the other three from toys for children under the age of three.

I am speaking tonight to this private member's bill, not only as a member of Parliament but also as a mother of three sons. Two of my sons have been diagnosed with cancer, different types of cancer. The cancers that my two sons have are not related.

Of course, as parents, we search for reasons why this devastating disease has attacked our child, or in my case, two of my children. I believe, in talking to their oncologist, in talking to the researchers in this field, that it is entirely possible that both of the instances of cancer in my children may have been caused by environmental degradation.

As we collect more and more evidence of the harmful effects of these chemicals to our bodies and to our environment, it is time to act. Both these private members' bills introduce a concept of reverse onus, which would require proof that a chemical is safe before it is allowed to be marketed rather than having to prove a chemical is harmful after the fact.

We owe this to our children. Our children deserve no less. The NDP is supporting this private member's bill to rid our environment of PFOS, a harmful chemical.

I urge the member who has introduced the bill, the member for Beaches—East York, to bring the support of her caucus to my colleague's private member's bill to ban phthalates.

As I said earlier, we owe this abundance of caution to our children. We owe it for a healthy environment and for the development of healthy children. What could be more important than the health of our children and the future of our planet? We must all support this bill in the House of Commons.

Mrs. Susan Kadis (Thornhill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today in support of Bill C-298, the private member's bill of the member for Beaches—East York, to add perfluorooctane sulfonate, otherwise known as PFOS, to the virtual elimination list under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, CEPA.

Last week we held a joint news conference to raise awareness of the need to act more quickly in protecting the health of Canadians and to bring this pressing issue to the attention of all Canadians. "What you don't know can't hurt you". That old saying is obviously not true. We cannot turn a blind eye to these realities. We can no longer ignore how serious these chemicals are, and they are all around us.

Earlier this month a recent study, undertaken by Environmental Defence, titled "Polluted Children, Toxic Nation" provided yet more reasons for the government to take action. It tested children, parents, grandparents from five Canadian families who provided blood and urine samples that were tested for 68 toxic chemicals. The shocking results indicated that 46 of these toxic chemicals were detected, including PFOS.

The presence of these chemicals in children as young as 10 years old raises serious concerns about what impact they may have on the health, well-being and development of Canadian families today and in the future. The bottom line is the toxicity of Canadians is increasing, and this should be of concern to everyone, and no less to the government.

The *Globe and Mail* also recently did a week long series about toxic chemicals and their impact on us as human beings and our environment. I know my constituents, many of whom brought these issues to my attention, have expressed a great deal of concern and want the government to take action and not sit idly by.

In October 2004 both Environment Canada and Health Canada thought that the virtual elimination of PFOS not only could be implemented, but should be. There was no room for ambiguity on this question.

There are many aspects in our lives that we cannot control. Therefore, it is particularly incumbent upon us to take the appropriate steps, especially when we have the opportunity and the tools to take preventative and precautionary measures to eliminate a number of very significant and serious threats to our environment and our health.

Private Members' Business

As science and technology move forward at lightening speed, with more information becoming available and coming to light, it is imperative that we do not keep our heads in the sand. On the contrary, we need to respond accordingly and in a timely way. We need to protect the health of Canadians.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment has said that PFOS is not in Canada, but I would wholeheartedly disagree with him. If that were true, then why was it found in Canadians? The reality is we are learning more and more about our surrounding environment and the elements that affect our health. People have become more educated over time and demanding that we take seriously the threats and risks to our health.

There have been many instances, historically, when people have resisted questioning the status quo until it has proven unequivocally true. One glaring example is smoking and lung cancer. Knowledge has allowed people and governments to take action to protect their health. Sometimes just changing one aspect or behaviour has made a significant difference.

We must wake up and take the lead in these matters. Canada is lagging behind and it will be at all our expense, in particular our children who have been found to have the most concentrated levels. The U.S., the European Union and other nations have recognized the urgency and are taking action.

I will quote from the testimony given recently by Dr. Kapil Khatter, a family physician working with Pollution Watch, which is a joint project of Environmental Defence and the Canadian Environmental Law Association. He said:

There is ample evidence to suggest that Canada is failing to meet its environmental challenges, and falling behind internationally. According to a recent study of OECD data, Canada ranked 28th out of 29 OECD countries in emissions, 29th out of 29 in volatile organic compounds, 27th out of 28 in sulphur oxides, 26th out of 28 in nitrogen oxides...

The United States has legally enforceable national ambient air quality standards and water quality criteria that are enforceable, whereas Canada does not. They have strong regulations and agreements with companies to phase out some of the most persistent and toxic chemicals, the most problematic chemicals right now, like PFOS flame retardants and stain repellents, while we are still trying to finalize our assessments. The United States has a comprehensive program to test for body chemical levels. We don't even know how much lead our children are being exposed to right now.

Health is of the utmost importance to Canadians. We cannot turn our back on the need to take steps to protect and improve our health and quality of life. The stakes are too high.

These types of known problematic or dangerous chemicals have been shown to leach into our environment, not only in the area of their use but they are able to migrate.

As a 14 year breast cancer survivor, I understand and appreciate how precious and important good health is. When we consider that this chemical has been shown to cause breast cancer in animals, this is more than compelling. The fact that this seems to be taken not as seriously as it should be and rejected out of hand by the government is very disturbing. We must apply precautionary measures where there is or has been a demonstrated or likely risk factor.

• (1835)

We have a responsibility to future generations, to our children. We cannot just wash our hands of information brought to our attention in

such a fashion. We must confront and deal with this issue quickly and decisively.

As a mother five children, I am more troubled by the effects, particularly on our children. They are the most vulnerable, developmentally, and they are relying on all of us to be vigilant regarding their health.

Yes, we must live our lives with zest and full participation, but we must do so with great regard and respect to this great gift of health. I understand that, as many others do. It must not be taken for granted; it must be protected. First and foremost, we must all be our own health advocates, never giving up these rights and responsibilities to safeguard our health as individuals or as a government.

I applaud my colleague from Beaches—East York for moving this issue to the top of the agenda. We have the tools available to take the appropriate steps to avert the threat that these chemicals pose. All that is needed is the will to take action.

There is a provision in the act that allows for interim orders to be made respecting such substances as one option. The issue of adding perfluorooctane sulfonate, PFOS, to the virtual elimination list is now before the House. Now it is up to the government to move forward without further delay or procrastination. The health of all Canadians depends on it.

• (1840)

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Simcoe North, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Department of the Environment's draft screening assessment for perfluorooctane sulfonate, known as PFOS, concluded in October 2004 that PFOS is a persistent bioaccumulative and inherently toxic substance in the environment. It meets the definition in section 64 of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, 1999, in that it is entering into the environment in a quantity or concentration or under conditions that have a harmful effect on the environment. The initial conclusions have not changed and it is expected that a final assessment will be published shortly.

The Department of the Environment is proposing that priority be given to the development of actions to protect the health of Canadians and their environment. Under the existing legislative and regulatory framework, the Department of the Environment will propose and develop actions for PFOS with the participation of stakeholders, including the public, industry, non-governmental organizations, and provincial and territorial governments.

To support the development of these actions, the Department of the Environment will investigate the various instruments and tools available to control PFOS in Canada. The Department of the Environment will analyze the costs and benefits of the proposed actions to ensure the most appropriate approach that results in a net benefit for Canadians is chosen.

It would be premature to add PFOS to the virtual elimination list and develop release limit regulations as proposed by Bill C-298 before the Department of the Environment can fully consult or perform the necessary supporting analysis. The Department of the Environment is expecting to propose a strategy very shortly in consultation with stakeholders.

Private Members' Business

This strategy will outline proposed actions to control PFOS in a way that releases to the Canadian environment would ultimately be eliminated to ensure the protection of the health of Canadians and their environment. The development of the strategy and the implementation of actions will be carried out independently of any decision on the virtual elimination list or regulations prescribing release concentration limits. Today's reality is that PFOS is not manufactured in or exported from Canada, nor is it used or imported into Canada in significant quantities.

In 2000 the major global manufacturer of PFOS announced a voluntary phase-out of production of this substance by 2002. Prior to 2002 the primary uses of PFOS in Canada were for applications involving water, oil, soil and grease repellents for fabric, leather, packaging, rugs and carpets, as well as additives in firefighting foams, aviation hydraulic fluids, photographic photofinishing, paints and coatings.

Since 2002 the majority of PFOS imports and uses in Canada have ceased. In comparison to early PFOS import and use data whereby seven industrial sectors were involved, a survey of Canadian industry confirms that after the phase-out for the 2004 calendar year, PFOS is imported and used by only a single industrial sector.

With the exception of the existing stockpile of PFOS based firefighting foam that is used to extinguish fuel fires, all other stockpiles of PFOS in Canada have now been exhausted. It is estimated that this reduction in use in Canada since 2002 has resulted in a significant decrease in releases to the environment. Also, PFOS products and formulations are largely unavailable to the average Canadian consumer.

The Department of the Environment plans to pursue actions that will ensure PFOS does not re-enter the Canadian marketplace and address the remaining exposure sources. Stakeholders will be given a formal opportunity to participate in consultations shortly following the distribution of the proposed PFOS risk management strategy. The ultimate objective of this strategy will be a total phase-out of PFOS in Canada.

The strategy will propose an action plan to address the environmental risks associated with PFOS in Canada and outline a proposed approach on the virtual elimination list. Stakeholders, including the public, industry, non-governmental organizations and provincial and territorial governments will have an opportunity to comment on this strategy through various forums. Further consultations with stakeholders will be held as the Department of the Environment proceeds with the implementation of the strategy and develops appropriate preventive and control instruments.

• (1845)

The Department of the Environment's ability to fully consult with stakeholders on the strategy, the approach to virtual elimination and any proposed preventive and control instruments that may follow would be limited under the timeline specified in proposed Bill C-298.

Bill C-298 is proposing to develop regulations prescribing release concentration limits of PFOS within nine months of specifying its levels of quantification. Given that most industrial and commercial uses of PFOS have already ceased in Canada, the key remaining

source of exposure is through municipal landfills and waste water treatment plants.

Potential releases of PFOS from those sources are expected from the disposal and use of consumer articles which were treated with PFOS as a repellent prior to 2002. These consumer articles include rugs and carpets, furniture, fabrics, leather articles, packaging and photographic material. A proposal to regulate the concentration of PFOS released from municipal landfills and waste water treatment facilities would require careful analysis to identify the availability of technology to capture or reduce PFOS from those sources and to determine if release concentration regulation is the most practical and cost-effective means of protecting the environment.

The Department of the Environment is continuing to work with the international community on PFOS. The approaches taken in other jurisdictions will be considered during the development and implementation of proposed actions in Canada.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has established three significant new use rules, SNURs, in 2002, 2003 and 2006 to control PFOS and its precursors and other perfluorinated compounds. The United Kingdom has proposed restrictions on the supply and use of PFOS. Sweden has filed a proposal for a national ban on PFOS with the European Commission. The European Union has proposed market instruments and use restrictions for PFOS in 2006.

PFOS is under consideration for addition to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe convention on long range transboundary air pollution and the protocol to the Stockholm convention which addresses persistent organic pollutants. PFOS continues to pass review steps for inclusion in the protocol and convention.

Canada will continue to engage our international partners in global action to eliminate the remaining uses and production of PFOS around the world and to complement our domestic actions. Supporting these efforts is critical to addressing the long range transport of PFOS into the Canadian environment and the ultimate global phase-out of these substances.

The Department of the Environment is committed to pollution prevention and the control of toxic substances. The necessary steps will be taken to continue the protection of the Canadian environment, especially in our Arctic ecosystems and to further minimize impacts on a global scale.

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are debating Bill C-298, the perfluorooctane sulfonate virtual elimination act. At the beginning of the bill reference is made to, "Her Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate and House of Commons of Canada". It is important that since we are paying respect to Her Majesty, we congratulate Her Majesty on her 80th birthday. We recently saw on the news all the fanfare that was associated with her birthday. She has been a long reigning monarch and has done great service to our dominion, along with many of the other countries in the Commonwealth. Her Majesty is a fine royal example for our assembly, as well as for many others.

Adjournment proceedings

I was recently at Spruce Meadows when His Royal Highness Prince Edward was there. He was presenting the Duke of Edinburgh awards. It was a lovely event. He was handing out awards to young people. The awards encourage young people, I believe starting at the age of 14, to participate in volunteer activities. As long as they have completed an expedition along with other aspects of a certain amount of community hours, by the time they turn 25 years of age, they are eligible for the Duke of Edinburgh award. That is something that is highly valuable and encourages young people to do volunteer work in their community. I congratulate members of the royal family in terms of their involvement and support for that program.

I will now turn to the intricacies of Bill C-298 which relates to the Conservative Party's environment policy. I am very supportive of what our party and government has done on this matter, in that we are pursuing a made in Canada policy.

There are many others in the House who support the idea for Canada's environmental policies to be made in other places. For example, when it comes to the Kyoto accord, they would prefer that our policies were made in Japan, or that in a sense we pay homage to Russia with regard to environmental policies by shipping credits and money to those countries that have worse environmental records than Canada's record. Some people in this place in their support for some of the Kyoto provisions would have us send money and credits and whatnot to China. That is a serious problem. We have to be mindful that it is far better to support a made in Canada policy.

Another country that has an incredible number of people along with some policies that could be questioned is India. India is a large parliamentary democracy. We want to make sure that our policies are made in Canada.

What we are talking about with Bill C-298 is the idea that we will be dealing with waste water treatment here in Canada. We will be dealing with landfills here in Canada. We are not dealing with exporting credits or moneys, Canadian taxpayer dollars, to other jurisdictions in order for them to look after some of their concerns. The environment is a global concern, but we must look at what we can do here in our own backyard before we look overseas internationally.

We can suggest things to those other countries as they can suggest things to us, but it is very important that we look after Canada first. As a matter of fact, as legislators, Canada is our primary responsibility. It is important that we are mindful of that, that we look after our own backyard. We must do the best for our children and grandchildren.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

• (1855)

[*Translation*]

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian embassy in Damascus, Syria, processes permanent

residence applications from the following countries: Syria, Cyprus and Iran, 41%, Iraq, 15%, and Jordan and Lebanon, 23%.

This means that Cyprus, Syria and Jordan combined make up 21% of the claims. This is, therefore, an embassy whose needs are not really local, but elsewhere, when we look at the other percentages.

The Damascus embassy has around 11 officers and 36 locally employed staff, compared to the Ivory Coast embassy, which has 6 or 7 employees and processes claims from 16 African countries. We see that in 80% of the cases, all the permanent residence applications in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, are processed in 31 months. In Damascus it takes 61 months and the world average is 53 months. What is going on at that embassy?

Currently in Beirut, Lebanon, there is a Canadian embassy with some nine employees, which is just a satellite office for temporary residence applications. My numbers on the staff are approximate.

We are told by CIC, and I quote:

Over 50% of those who apply for permanent residence do not need to be interviewed in person.

They must be kidding. This means that the office in Damascus, which takes 61 months on average to process files, fast-tracks 50% of the files from Lebanon. The processing time should therefore be shorter.

We know that there are tensions between Lebanon and Syria that were exacerbated by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on February 14, 2005. Other Lebanese leaders were also assassinated. This led to Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon on April 26, 2005.

CIC tells us:

After the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in Beirut in February 2002, some representatives and family members of Lebanese applicants expressed concerns about not being able to go to Damascus for interviews because of problems at the Syrian border. No such problems occurred. The RPC in Damascus checked with its clients to make sure there was no problem crossing the border.

That means that CIC does not even know when this political figure was assassinated.

Once again, they must be kidding. On November 1, 2005, when he was sitting on the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the current Minister of Public Safety stated, and I quote:

Syria has tried to rule Lebanon for decades and now that it has been forced to withdraw, it is still trying to diminish the hopes of the Lebanese people.

Has a decades-old situation changed in seven months? The borders between Lebanon and Syria have been closed many times. People who have been waiting for an interview for years have had it postponed.

If this government recognizes Lebanon's sovereignty and respects the Lebanese diaspora in Canada and Quebec, it is time that it sent all the applications for permanent residence back to the existing embassy in Beirut. It is a matter of dignity and security.

Adjournment proceedings

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I join the debate on this topic. In particular, I acknowledge and thank the hon. member for Ahuntsic for her ongoing interest in immigration matters. I have listened with great interest to her views and concerns. Though we might differ on a number of issues, I know we share a common belief in the vital role that immigration has played and continues to play in the social fabric of our wonderful country, Canada.

At the outset, I would like to once again reiterate the fundamental and unwavering commitment that the Prime Minister and the government have made toward better supporting outcomes for newcomers to Canada to ensure they can fully integrate and contribute to our communities and economy.

The hon. member has raised a specific question and concern over people living in Lebanon who are applying for permanent residence in Canada and who must do so through the Canadian Embassy in Damascus, Syria.

I would like to take this opportunity to outline the extensive presence of Canada's offices in support of the commitment we have made to the Middle Eastern region regarding immigration to Canada.

Canada has an extensive presence in the world and in the Middle East and it tries to ensure as much reasonable access as possible.

The minister, in his last appearance before the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, left the committee with the message that there was a greater need for a focus on improving outcomes for clients of the department.

The regional processing centre in Damascus, Syria, is Canada's largest in the Middle East. It currently is supported by 11 Canada-based officers, one migration integrity officer and 36 locally engaged staff. The decision to locate the processing centre in Damascus was based on its relative stability and infrastructure.

The majority of the centre's clientele are either Iranian or Lebanese. In the two years, 2003 to 2005, 41% of the permanent resident applications received at this centre were from Iranian citizens, 23% from Lebanese residents and 15% of the applicants were made by Iraqi citizens.

However, I would also like to point out that our Damascus processing centre is directly supported by satellite missions in Beirut, Lebanon, Tehran, Iran, and Amman, Jordan. These vital satellite missions process applications for study and work permits and documents relating to permanent resident travel.

Our office in Amman, Jordan, performs immigrant interviews on behalf of the Damascus processing centre for sponsored spouses and children from Iraq and Jordan.

The satellite office in Beirut, Lebanon, processes all types of temporary resident applications, as well as those for permanent resident travel documents. It also performs immigrant interviews on behalf of the regional processing centre in Damascus for sponsored spouses and children from Lebanon. In most cases, there is no need for an interviewee to travel outside of Lebanon.

Recent world events, such as has been mentioned by the hon. member, have led many representatives and family members of Lebanese applicants to express concerns about the need to travel to Damascus for interviews.

Our officials in Damascus have verified with clients that there have been no difficulties crossing the border between Lebanon and Syria. We have been monitoring the situation very closely for some time, and will continue to do so. This approach is consistent with and reflects our policies and actions in regard to supporting those wishing to immigrate to Canada from the Middle East.

I hope I provided some beneficial contribution to the proceedings tonight.

● (1900)

[Translation]

Mrs. Maria Mourani: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his comments.

It seems to me that we are being ridiculed. In fact, the parliamentary secretary has just repeated the exact text written on the sheet I received from CIC, namely, the answer to the committee. I am not here to have something read to me.

Here is what I would like to know about these people, Lebanese people who are applying to move here. Can they have their applications for permanent residence fully processed at the Canadian Embassy in Beirut? When these people cross borders, they are humiliated, they are afraid and very stressed. Borders are sometimes closed and they cannot cross. Their appointments are cancelled and postponed for up to nine months. This is unacceptable.

The infrastructure exists in Syria. It must be fully exploited. The sovereignty of that country must be respected. That country, which is full of tension, must be respected. It is as if we here in Canada were told we had to go to the United States to apply to go to Cuba.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration.

[English]

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Speaker, I can certainly understand and appreciate the frustration expressed by my hon. colleague. The department will do whatever it can to ensure the infrastructure and facilities it has will be used to the maximum effect to ensure the best result possible can be achieved.

Since forming government we have put an extraordinary effort into immigration and immigration policy to ensure the outcomes are there. It has been a priority of this department to monitor very closely the access and process provided to those aspiring to become citizens of Canada.

Whether it be from here or from abroad, we are interested in improving outcomes wherever possible. Our embassies abroad and their officials who support them are doing their utmost to see that all the information and avenues are made known and available to those considering Canada as their new home and, most important, that they are respected and protected under international law and are able to proceed through the process to become Canadian citizens.

Adjournment proceedings

● (1905)

AGRICULTURE

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on June 7, I asked the Minister of Agriculture two questions. The first concerned the government's position on supply management and its defence of this Canadian success story at the WTO. The second question concerned whether the government would allow western Canadian grain farmers the right to decide in a plebiscite based on a clear and direct question whether they support the single desk selling function of the board, yea or nay.

On June 7 the government failed to answer either question and its actions since that date have demonstrated that it has no intention of really defending strenuously our supply management producers, nor does the Harper government have anything but contempt for the—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member is an experienced member of the House. He knows that we do not name other members of the House, not directly and not indirectly.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, nor does the government have anything but contempt for the democratic process when it comes to allowing western grain producers the right to decide the future of the Canadian Wheat Board.

With respect to supply management, the government demonstrated what can only be contempt for, one, its campaign promise and, two, contempt for those primary producers involved in the dairy industry saying that it supports the industry but is not really supporting the report of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food that was tabled in the House which was support for the industry.

Worse yet, the government came in talking about free votes and, by the look of the pinched faces on the members opposite, they were basically whipped into the position of supporting the government in terms of opposing the resolution of the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food.

Three, I think we will eventually see that there will be contempt from the majority of the members of the House if the government fails to act on the vote taken in the House on June 13.

As I said a moment ago, the Prime Minister promised free votes during the election campaign and on Tuesday we saw anything but that from the Conservative Party of Canada.

On point two, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food said that he and the government strongly supported supply management and yet when it came to voting the Conservatives turned against farmers and voted in the opposite direction.

On point three, the vote against defending our dairy producers was bad enough but, to compound that contempt for our producers, the minister attempted to belittle the report and recommendations in a motion supported by the majority of members of the House and flatly refused to do what the House had in fact ordered.

On the issue of the Canadian Wheat Board, the government has given every indication, through testimony at the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food, that it does not intend to hold a plebiscite on a direct question as to whether western grain farmers support the single desk selling feature of the board or not.

At committee the parliamentary secretary to the minister, in a similar fashion to the minister, refused to state that the government would allow for such a vote, a vote that is prescribed under the Canadian Wheat Board Act and a vote that would allow all producers holding a permit book to express their support or opposition to the single desk selling role of the board.

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary (for the Canadian Wheat Board) to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am here tonight in response to a question that was asked by the member on the subject of support of supply management. He did not indicate that he wanted to deal with the issue of the Canadian Wheat Board at this point. It is more likely that we will be dealing with it next week and we look for his support, particularly on the private member's bill, Bill C-300, that is coming in from my colleague from Battlefords—Lloydminster.

I want to address the issue that he asked us to talk about. That is the subject of support for supply management and the WTO negotiations.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to reaffirm this government's commitment to pursuing a positive outcome for all of the Canadian agricultural sectors in the current World Trade Organization agriculture negotiations.

Canada is working hard at the WTO to achieve a more level international playing field through the elimination of export subsidies, a substantial reduction of trade-distorting domestic support, and real and significant market access improvements.

Achievement of these objectives would provide significant benefit to Canada by helping all of our producers and processors to compete more effectively in a fairer international marketplace.

For example, this government recognizes the importance of these negotiations for our exporters. Canada is the world's fourth largest agrifood exporter, with exports of \$26.2 billion in 2005, and we want to build on this success.

That is why we are seeking an ambitious outcome at the WTO. We are continuing to push hard for a tariff reduction formula that would offer our exporters the prospect of substantially improved access into key developed and developing countries.

We are also pressing for very significant cuts to the trade-distorting domestic subsidies that countries like the United States and the European Union currently offer their producers. For this reason, we are pleased that the negotiations are structured around the concept of having the biggest subsidizers make the largest reductions.

These achievements, and also the agreement reached by WTO members to eliminate export subsidies by 2013, will go a very long way to helping our exporters compete successfully at the global level.

At the same time, this government recognizes that Canada has both offensive and defensive interests in these negotiations. Our negotiating position reflects the diversity and strength of our sector and that sector includes both export oriented and supply managed industries.

I have outlined already how we are working hard for our exporters. I want to emphasize that this government strongly supports Canada's supply management system. The Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food has made this commitment very clear. The government believes that Canada's supply management system is a successful choice for our dairy, egg and poultry producers.

This commitment to supply management is evident in how hard we are working in Geneva on behalf of this sector. It is a fact that we are facing significant pressure at the WTO on key issues of importance to our supply management system. Nevertheless, this government remains committed to aggressively defending all of our agricultural interests.

● (1910)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I will give the parliamentary secretary the benefit of the doubt on the question. Really, on June 7, my question covered both supply management and, in the supplementary, the Canadian Wheat Board. As I said, we got answers on neither that day.

The parliamentary secretary's remarks really relate to the negotiations done by the previous minister in the previous government in terms of getting the bans and the higher reduction for the EU, Japan and the United States.

The parliamentary secretary failed to address the key point of my question. How strong is the government's support for supply management?

We on this side agree with a balanced position. In fact, the industry wanted a balanced position in terms of our export oriented commodities and our supply managed and orderly market commodities.

Adjournment proceedings

He failed to mention in his response what the government's position is on the sensitive products category. We have gained substantial ground in terms of sensitive products with other international partners. What is the government's position on that category, which will allow supply management to function?

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Speaker, as the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food has emphasized many times, the success of the Doha round is important for all of Canadian agriculture. We are going to continue to work closely with other WTO members, with the provinces and with Canada's industry stakeholders, including both the exporters and the supply managed industries, toward completing the WTO negotiations by the end of this year.

The WTO agriculture negotiations are in an intensive phase. Canada is actively engaged in playing an important part in advancing those negotiations. The minister is planning to be in Geneva at the end of the month to continue to work hard for an outcome that protects and advances the interests of all of Canadian agriculture.

As the negotiations progress, we will continue to seek the best possible outcome for Canada at the WTO. As the minister has made very clear, even as Canada faces real pressure on some issues in these negotiations, we cannot and will not walk away. We will stay at the table. We will continue to listen closely to our industry on how to advance Canada's interests. We will continue to seek the best possible outcome for all of Canadian agriculture.

● (1915)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted.

[*English*]

Accordingly the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 7:15 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Thursday, June 15, 2006

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Employment Equity Act

Mr. Blackburn 2403

Criminal Code

Mr. Toews 2403

Bill C-19. Introduction and first reading 2403

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed) 2403

Canada Airports Act

Mr. Cannon 2403

Bill C-20. Introduction and first reading 2403

(Motions deemed adopted, bill read the first time and printed) 2403

Afghanistan

Mr. Harper 2403

Mr. Patry 2404

Mr. Duceppe 2404

Ms. Black 2405

Employment Equity Act

Mr. Blackburn 2405

Mr. Coderre 2406

Mrs. Lavallée 2407

Ms. Davies 2407

Interparliamentary Delegations

Mr. Mills 2408

Committees of the House

Official Languages

Mr. Lauzon 2408

Petitions

Canada Post

Mr. Scott 2409

Child Care

Mr. Allen 2409

Autism

Ms. Charlton 2409

Child Care

Mr. Goodale 2409

Mr. Maloney 2409

Mr. Savage 2409

Questions on the Order Paper

Mr. Lukiwski 2409

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Business of Supply

Opposition Motion—Seniors

Ms. Charlton 2410

Motion 2410

Mr. Dhaliwal 2413

Ms. Brunelle 2413

Mr. Hawn 2413

Mr. André 2414

Mr. Siksay 2414

Mrs. Yelich 2414

Ms. Charlton 2415

Ms. Demers 2416

Mr. Doyle 2416

Mrs. Mathysen 2417

Mr. Wilson 2418

Mr. Chan 2418

Ms. Black 2420

Mr. André 2421

Mr. Hawn 2421

Mr. Marston 2421

Ms. Demers 2421

Ms. Brunelle 2423

Mr. Masse 2423

Ms. Charlton 2423

Mrs. DeBellefeuille 2424

Mr. Masse 2425

Mr. Hawn 2427

Mr. Stanton 2427

Mr. Marston 2427

Mr. Fletcher 2429

Ms. Charlton 2430

Ms. Guergis 2430

Amendment 2432

Ms. Charlton 2432

Mr. Stanton 2432

Mrs. Mathysen 2432

Mr. Warawa 2432

Ms. Davies 2432

Motion 2432

(Motion agreed to) 2433

Mrs. Mathysen 2433

Mr. Van Loan 2434

Mr. Siksay 2434

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Elder Abuse

Mr. Hanger 2436

Tourism Week

Mr. Bagnell 2436

Manufacturing Industry

Mrs. DeBellefeuille 2436

Philippine Heritage Week

Ms. Wasylycia-Leis 2437

Mary Thomas

Mr. Mayes 2437

Governor General's Caring Canadian Award

Mr. Patry 2437

Graduating Classes of 2006	
Mr. Moore (Fundy Royal)	2437
Manufacturing Industry	
Mr. Vincent	2438
Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis	
Mr. Tilson	2438
Elder Abuse	
Mr. Easter	2438
Canadian Forces Snowbirds	
Mr. Batters	2438
Seniors	
Mr. Christopherson	2438
Yvonne Leblanc	
Mr. LeBlanc	2439
Manufacturing Industry	
Mrs. Lavallée	2439
Children's Hospital Fundraising Event	
Mr. Simms	2439
Elder Abuse	
Mr. Allison	2439

ORAL QUESTIONS

Softwood Lumber	
Mr. Graham (Toronto Centre)	2440
Mr. Harper	2440
Mr. Graham (Toronto Centre)	2440
Mr. Harper	2440
Mr. Graham (Toronto Centre)	2440
Mr. Harper	2440
The Environment	
Mr. Godfrey	2440
Ms. Ambrose	2440
Mr. Godfrey	2440
Ms. Ambrose	2440
Manufacturing Industry	
Mr. Duceppe	2441
Mr. Harper	2441
Mr. Duceppe	2441
Mr. Harper	2441
Mr. Crête	2441
Mr. Carrie	2441
Mr. Crête	2441
Mr. Carrie	2441
Softwood Lumber	
Mr. Layton	2442
Mr. Harper	2442
Mr. Layton	2442
Mr. Harper	2442
Canadian Heritage	
Mr. McTeague	2442
Mr. Nicholson	2442
Mr. McTeague	2442

Mr. Nicholson	2442
Health	
Ms. Dhalla	2442
Mr. Nicholson	2443
Ms. Dhalla	2443
Mr. Nicholson	2443
Kyoto Protocol	
Mr. Bigras	2443
Ms. Ambrose	2443
Mr. Bigras	2443
Ms. Ambrose	2443
Softwood Lumber	
Mr. Paquette	2443
Mr. Carrie	2444
Mr. Laforest	2444
Mr. Carrie	2444
Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency	
Mr. Savage	2444
Mr. MacKay	2444
Mr. Savage	2444
Mr. MacKay	2444
Foreign Affairs	
Mr. Szabo	2444
Mr. MacKay	2444
Mr. Szabo	2445
Mr. MacKay	2445
Public Works and Government Services	
Mr. Batters	2445
Mr. Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)	2445
The Environment	
Mr. Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley)	2445
Ms. Ambrose	2445
Mr. Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley)	2445
Ms. Ambrose	2445
Marriage	
Mrs. Jennings	2446
Mr. Carrie	2446
Mrs. Jennings	2446
Mr. Carrie	2446
Aboriginal Affairs	
Ms. Neville	2446
Mr. Prentice	2446
Ms. Neville	2446
Mr. Prentice	2446
Older Workers	
Mr. Lessard	2447
Mrs. Yelich	2447
Ms. Bonsant	2447
Mrs. Yelich	2447
Decorum	
Mr. Goodale	2447
Mr. Nicholson	2447

Charitable Donations	
Mr. Schellenberger	2447
Ms. Oda	2447
Automobile Industry	
Mr. Masse	2447
Mr. Emerson	2448
Mr. Masse	2448
Mr. Emerson	2448
Decorum	
Mr. Goodale	2448
Mr. Baird	2448
Justice	
Mr. Arthur	2448
Mr. Toews	2448
Presence in Gallery	
The Speaker	2448
Points of Order	
Response by Minister of the Environment during Oral Questions	
Mr. LeBlanc	2448
Ms. Ambrose	2449
Business of the House	
Mr. Goodale	2449
Mr. Nicholson	2449

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Business of Supply	
Opposition Motion—Seniors	
Motion	2449
Mrs. DeBellefeuille	2449
Mr. Siksay	2449
Mr. Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley)	2450
Mr. Murphy (Charlottetown)	2450
Ms. Priddy	2452
Ms. Demers	2453
Mrs. Yelich	2453
Ms. Wasylycia-Leis	2453
Mr. Tonks	2455
Mrs. Yelich	2455

Ms. Demers	2456
Mr. Cannon	2456
Mr. Szabo	2457
Mr. Nadeau	2457
Mr. Allison	2458
Mr. Murphy (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe)	2459
Ms. Demers	2460
Mr. Layton	2460
Mr. Poilievre	2462
Mr. Tonks	2462
Ms. Crowder	2462
Mrs. Yelich	2464
Mr. Nadeau	2464
Mr. St-Cyr	2465
Mr. Lussier	2466
Mr. Crête	2467
Mr. Nadeau	2468
Ms. Bonsant	2468
Ms. Ablonczy	2469
Division deemed demanded and deferred	2470

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Perfluorooctane Sulfonate Virtual Elimination Act	
Ms. Minna	2470
Bill C-298. Second reading	2470
Mr. Miller	2472
Mr. Warawa	2473
Mr. Bigras	2474
Ms. Black	2475
Mrs. Kadis	2475
Mr. Stanton	2476
Mr. Anders	2477

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

Citizenship and Immigration	
Mrs. Mourani	2478
Mr. Komarnicki	2479
Agriculture	
Mr. Easter	2480
Mr. Anderson	2480

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