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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Wednesday, February 7, 2007

—

Speaker: The Honourable Peter Milliken

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, February 7, 2007

The House met at 2 p.m.

Prayers

• (1400)

[English]

The Speaker: It being Wednesday, we will now have the singing of the national anthem led by the hon. member for Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound.

[Members sang the national anthem]

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

SAFER INTERNET DAY

Mr. Art Hanger (Calgary Northeast, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday and today, dozens of countries around the world are recognizing Safer Internet Day.

Safer Internet Day is a chance to raise awareness about the dangers that lurk on-line and encourage all parents and guardians to protect their children from them.

The need has never been greater. A new study has found that more than 42% of children as young as 10, who are using the Internet, have recently been exposed to pornography. Just this morning we read a news story about a child porn ring that may include more than 100 Canadian offenders.

As a government, we are taking steps to protect children, trying to increase penalties for child luring and raise the age of sexual consent but parents are always the first line of defence. Websites, like the Kids' Internet Safety Alliance, are an excellent resource if they are looking for help.

On this Safer Internet Day, let us encourage everyone who cares for a child to educate themselves and then their children on how to stay safe on-line.

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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Roger Valley (Kenora, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to recognize two members of the Wabaseemoong First Nation First Nation. Chief Eric Fisher and Councillor Waylon Scott are two

men who have worked tirelessly to improve the quality of life in their community.

The Wabaseemoong First Nation, or, as it is commonly referred to, Whitedog, is located just over 100 kilometres north of the city of Kenora. Wabaseemoong is an example of how hard-working community leaders can achieve great things for their communities. However, Wabaseemoong is also an example of the government's inaction on aboriginal issues. This community would have benefited greatly from the initiatives outlined in the Kelowna accord but the government decided not to ratify it.

Chief Fisher and Councillor Scott have traveled to Ottawa this week to bring to the minister's attention the unnecessary delay in the construction of their school. The condition of the current school is such that the community had to order it closed for a period of two weeks as the community could not ensure the safety of the students.

The Conservative government has delayed the start of a new school. The parliamentary secretary to the minister comes in to the riding and does not announce a date for starting the school. The students of Wabaseemoong need a chance at an education. The community of Wabaseemoong needs a new school.

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[Translation]

SHERBROOKE SUMMIT

Ms. France Bonsant (Compton—Stanstead, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on January 19, I was very proud to participate in the pre-summit forum for the Sherbrooke summit to be held on May 16.

I would like to thank the 280 people who attended the pre-summit forum. The large number of participants from all sectors showed their interest in bringing about positive development for Sherbrooke's future.

During the forum, the following vision was adopted: "In 2012, Sherbrooke will be recognized in Quebec, in Canada and internationally as a major centre for social and economic innovation in a community that offers exceptional quality of life".

The Sherbrooke summit is a local initiative that showcases local people's exceptional dynamism and highlights their interest in regional development. On behalf of the Bloc Québécois, I would like to wish all participants a successful Sherbrooke summit on May 16.

Statements by Members

• (1405)
[English]

STATUS OF WOMEN

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last Friday, my NDP colleagues in Hamilton and I hosted a community forum to discuss the local impact of the cuts imposed by the Conservative government. What we learned was disheartening and shocking. The government is failing the most vulnerable in our communities and it must stop.

Poverty in Hamilton is real. Nearly one in five Hamiltonians live at or below the poverty line. On any given night, 399 people seek emergency shelter, twice the number who did in 1995.

That situation is most grim, however, for the women in my community. In Hamilton, women make up 52% of the population but 59% of the adults living in poverty. Among seniors over 75, the poverty rate for women is 36%, double that of men and, for single mothers with preschool-age children, the poverty rate is an astounding 81%.

Instead of addressing these issues, the Conservatives have abandoned support for child care, affordable housing, pay equity, literacy programs, women's shelters and even the very notion of equality for women by gutting Status of Women Canada. However, they did find \$1 billion to give to the oil and gas industries.

My Canada includes more than their wealthy friends. It includes ordinary citizens who deserve their government's support.

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THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our new government is committed to real improvements in our transit system and our environment, not just empty promises like the previous Liberal government, but genuine action and real commitment.

I want to tell the House about the \$23 million investment this new government made in the GO transit system in my community on December 20 of last year. This work includes a new and additional third track and the widening and extending of the platforms at all three of our Burlington GO train stations.

We are investing in environmentally sound transportation such as commuter rail. This will help ease traffic congestion, combat smog and reduce greenhouse gases.

In my community, our new government has done more for transit and the fight against GHGs in one year than the Liberals did in 10 years. We set priorities and we get things done. Canadians cannot afford to go back.

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LEN HOPKINS

Hon. Jim Peterson (Willowdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is my sad duty to mark the death of Len Hopkins, Liberal member of Parliament.

Len represented his people from 1965 to 1997, an incredible 32 years and nine victories as the undefeated political champion of the

Ottawa Valley. He worked unstintingly for his people, saying, "Once you hang your shingle out, you're like the old time country doctor, on duty seven days a week, 365 days a year".

Len was best known for his strong support for Canada's military and for championing CFB Petawawa. He was AECL's undisputed champion and was ahead of his time in pushing for renewable energy such as biomass.

In retirement he led the charge to have the Ottawa River designated a Canadian heritage river. We will continue this fight in his name.

Asked about his legacy, Len said, "I would like to think I left some decency in the political system", and indeed he did, and what a difference he made for his constituents, for Canadians and for all of us.

I ask members to join me in giving thanks for Len Hopkins and condolences to his wonderful wife Lois and all members of the Hopkins family.

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[Translation]

QUEBEC WINTER CARNIVAL

Mr. Daniel Petit (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last Saturday, I had the pleasure of attending the first Quebec winter carnival night parade as it went through my riding, Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles.

I am proud that our Prime Minister, the member for Calgary Southwest, was in Quebec City for the opening of the 53rd Quebec winter carnival. This was the first time a Prime Minister of Canada attended the opening of the Quebec winter carnival, and it is all the more significant given the fact that Calgary and Quebec City have been twinned since 1956.

For many years now, both cities have participated together in the Quebec winter carnival and the Calgary stampede. This sets a great example of cooperation for all regions of the country.

I would like to invite my colleagues to participate in the second Quebec winter carnival night parade next Saturday, February 10. Welcome everyone!

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GEORGES FILION

Ms. Johanne Deschamps (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): Mr. Speaker, last Friday, the Valley of Saint-Sauveur lost one of its builders, Georges Filion, to leukemia at 67.

Statements by Members

Georges Filion was mayor of the municipality of Saint-Sauveur for more than 32 years, from 1973 to 2005. He was also warden of the Pays-d'en-Haut RCM and vice-president of the Union des municipalités régionales de comté du Québec.

This dedicated man played a leading role in the introduction of RCMs by the Government of Quebec in the 1970s.

On the eve of the 2005 municipal election, he announced that he was leaving politics in order to spend more time being with his family, doing volunteer work and enjoying his land.

On September 10, he was awarded the Quebec National Assembly medal.

My Bloc Québécois colleagues join me in extending our sympathies to his wife, Ginette, his family, his friends and the people of the Valley of Saint-Sauveur.

* * *

• (1410)

[English]

CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada's new government believes western grain farmers should have the choice on how they market their grain, while preserving a strong, viable, yet voluntary Wheat Board.

Farmers have told us that they want to be consulted on this issue, and that is exactly what we are delivering. It is my great pleasure to remind members of the House that the voting period for the barley plebiscite begins today. The three questions are clear, simple and to the point.

Canada's new government is committed to providing western wheat and barley producers with the freedom to choose how they market their grain. Canada's new government looks forward to what farmers have to say on this issue.

Farmers are the ones taking all the risks and making all the investments. They should not be punished or jailed for pursuing opportunities outside the Wheat Board if that makes good business sense to them. Whether selling to the Wheat Board or outside of it, why should farmers not be allowed the opportunity to seek out the best price possible for their products?

This vote is about asking farmers in a clear and honest way what they really want. Therefore, let us allow barley farmers to have their say. I encourage all those eligible to make their votes count.

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GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Hon. Maurizio Bevilacqua (Vaughan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as the Minister of Finance prepares his budget, the residents of Vaughan are crystal clear about their priorities. There is a consensus among my constituents. They want a balanced approach in the next budget, one that places people first.

They want the government to invest in key areas such as health care, education, environment, research and development and

infrastructure, including the extension of the Spadina subway line, as well as cut taxes and reduce the national debt.

The focus should be on growing a globally competitive, productive and sustainable economy, one that will improve Canadians' standard of living and quality of life.

The residents of Vaughan have been active participants in the prebudget consultation process. They expect the Conservative government to listen and act.

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THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to address some disturbing comments from the member for Ajax—Pickering. The new critic for natural resources recently revealed how far he and the leader of the Liberal Party could go to restrict development of Alberta's oil sands.

Quoting Charles Adler:

—he appeared...Dave Rutherford's program and was asked whether a [Leader of the Opposition] government would consider nationalizing oil companies if they didn't meet Kyoto standards. [The member for Ajax—Pickering] replied, "If they refuse to work with us...there will be consequences."

Reckless talk like this is insulting and frankly irresponsible, considering the importance of a strong oil and gas sector to both Alberta's and Canada's economic well-being.

I am glad Canada's new government has the courage to tackle important environmental issues, without throwing around immature and reckless threats. I hope the Leader of the Opposition recognizes the inappropriateness of his attack dog's comments and has the courage to discipline him for his bad behaviour.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the environment, everyday Canadians are way ahead of this country's business and political elites. The rest of us are ready to move from a polluting economy to a sustainable one. Daily I hear from constituents who truly worry that our children will not have clean air to breathe or water to drink.

The Conservatives want Canadians to believe they are getting serious about the environment. They have a new minister and a new legislative committee to fix their flawed bill.

The Prime Minister has an opportunity today to back up his words with action. He can make a real impact in Hamilton by funding two important local environmental initiatives.

For the year since they took power, I have called on the Conservative government to fund the cogeneration project at Stelco. It would improve emissions and air quality in Hamilton.

Oral Questions

The mayor of Hamilton is here today to ask the Prime Minister to fund the clean up of Randle Reef. Local activists and representatives like myself have been calling on the federal government to fund this important port rehabilitation project for years.

The time to act on Hamilton's solutions is now. An important reminder, act locally, think globally, must be reflected in this—

• (1415)

The Speaker: The hon. member for West Nova.

* * *

[Translation]

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Hon. Robert Thibault (West Nova, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in an increasingly competitive global economy, our country must bank on the future to maintain Canadians' prosperity and quality of life.

Now more than ever, the government has to promote access to higher education. Our country's future is being played out every day on its college and university campuses. The students attending these institutions today will be supporting the government's social and economic programs in the not-so-distant future. That is why we have to do our part to make sure they have all the tools they need to take on the challenges that lie ahead.

The 21st-century economy requires a 21st-century education system. That is the message the demonstrators outside this House are sending us.

We have understood that message, and we will give our unconditional support to a policy designed to increase the federal government's role in supporting our students financially.

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PAPERWEEK INTERNATIONAL

Mr. Yvon Lévesque (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, BQ): Mr. Speaker, with PaperWeek International underway, I cannot help but remind this Conservative government that the forest industry is in the midst of a major crisis and it is the government's duty to take action. As a result of its failure to act, more than 10,000 jobs in Quebec have disappeared since the beginning of the crisis. This government's inaction is appalling. It is time for the government to change tactics and do something to help the softwood lumber industry.

The Bloc Québécois has long been proposing possible solutions, such as accelerated amortization of equipment, measures to promote innovation and transformation, accessible programs to diversify lumber markets, and loans or tax credits for additional operating and innovation costs.

This government's next budget must include concrete measures to help the forest industry and to demonstrate to Quebeckers that this industry remains a priority for this government.

[English]

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today thousands of Canadians are braving the cold to protest the government's lack of action, but students are getting used to being left out in the cold by the Conservative government.

Under the Liberal government, billions of dollars were invested in post-secondary education, research, infrastructure and directly to students. It seems Conservatives love power, but they hate government and especially government programs that work. Take, for example, the summer career placement grants.

At a time when students need help the most, the government gutted \$55 million from the program. It was meanspirited, it was stupid and it was unnecessary. Now thousands of students are left to wonder where they will work to pay for tuition and not for profit organizations, which depend on the grants, are left out in the cold. This program needs to be restored immediately.

It is time for the Conservative government to warm up to students, get serious about post-secondary education and invest in our future like the previous Liberal government.

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SENATE TENURE LEGISLATION

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I stand in the House today to address the inaction we have seen from the Liberal senators on Bill S-4. Since being introduced in the Senate 253 days ago, we continue to see unelected, unaccountable Liberal senators filibustering, preventing any debate on this very important bill.

To add insult to injury, even the leader of the Liberal opposition in the Senate highlighted last week "You are appointed. You're not accountable".

Canadians have told us they want term limits for senators. The Liberal leader has publicly said that he supports term limits for senators. Yet this message seems to be lost on the Liberal senators. Is it that they just do not get it, or is it that the Liberal leader simply cannot lead his own caucus?

When will the Liberal leader stop this obstruction, stop defending this patronage in the Senate and allow us to debate this very important bill in the House of Commons?

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in his speech yesterday, the Prime Minister complained that the Liberal government had "dramatically expanded Ottawa's fiscal and jurisdictional reach".

*Oral Questions***POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION**

Well, the Liberals are proud that they have reached out to students, women and minorities in this country and that, in doing so, they have respected provincial jurisdictions.

Can the Prime Minister indicate which policies, programs and initiatives he wants the federal government to drop, other than the ones he has already slashed to the detriment of the least fortunate?

• (1420)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the leader of the Liberal Party is very proud of his centralist philosophy: such is the nature of the Liberal Party.

We have a very different philosophy. That is why, for example, we reached an historic agreement with Quebec on its representation at UNESCO. Furthermore, we will continue to provide direct benefits to the people of Quebec, benefits such as our family allowance that the opposition leader wants to cut.

[*English*]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, maybe the Prime Minister will be a bit more courageous in English and he will name the policies, programs and initiatives that he wants to cut and how he will dismantle the role of the federal government.

In the past, he has been much more precise. He talked about health, post-secondary education, skills training, housing, forestry, mining, culture and cities. Which programs does the Prime Minister want the federal government to stop for all Canadians?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the Leader of the Opposition knows, the government has been investing in areas of core federal responsibility like national defence, international trade, security and direct assistance for Canadian families.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note what the Leader of the Opposition wants to do. He wants to kill pension income splitting for seniors. He wants to repeal our tax cuts, including the GST cut. He votes against anti-crime legislation. He wants to take away the child care benefit from seniors, to scrap the softwood lumber agreement, to rip up military contracts and all the benefits to Canadian firms in all regions. We do not want to go back.

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Leader of the Opposition, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will ask the Prime Minister the question again. Maybe the architect of firewall federalism could answer the question.

Which programs, initiatives and policies does he want the federal government to stop? In what way does he want to dismantle the federal government?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the programs the government has been delivering to Canadian families are very clear.

The government's philosophy of federalism is very clear, which is why we have a country that is more united and why we are not talking about waste, about scandal, about corruption and about the bad old days of the centralizing Liberal Party.

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, students are demonstrating on Parliament Hill today and they know the government has wasted a year.

The government has done nothing to improve access to post-secondary education. It has done nothing to help low income families send their kids to college. It also has done nothing for aboriginal Canadians seeking access to higher education.

Why has the government wasted a year before developing a strategy for investment in post-secondary education?

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, upon coming to office, the government moved immediately to help students.

We introduced a textbook tax credit. We gave a \$1,000 apprenticeship grant to people who were going into the trades. We also moved to remove the federal tax on bursaries and scholarships.

The one thing we will not do is say how much we care on one hand and then cut transfers to the provinces by \$25 billion like the Liberal Party did when it was in power.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Michael Ignatieff (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this government has done nothing in the past year to improve on-the-job training. Aboriginals, immigrants and the disabled are particularly affected by this government's negligence.

How much longer do we have to wait for a real national policy on investment for on-the-job training?

• (1425)

[*English*]

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know where the member has been. This government moved immediately to provide an apprenticeship grant to people going into the trades. We moved to provide a tax credit to employers who hire apprentices.

The member speaks about immigrants. This government introduced \$307 million in programming for settlement services to help immigrants adjust to this country, helping them to read and write and learn the language, something that government voted against.

* * *

[*Translation*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, like the Conservative government, the Alberta government and the automotive sector have stated publicly that they do not want to attain the Kyoto protocol targets and that they would prefer that intensity targets, rather than absolute greenhouse gas emission reduction targets, be put in place.

Oral Questions

Is this not proof that when it comes to the environment, the Prime Minister is siding with the oil companies in Alberta and the automotive industry in Ontario, at the expense of Quebec, which is doing its part to achieve the Kyoto targets?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting. The leader of the Bloc is still talking about oil industry subsidies. The fact is that this government put an end to income trusts for the oil industry, a special status for some companies. And now the Bloc Québécois is trying to reconsider its position in committee.

Our government's position is clear; the Bloc's position and contradictions are clear.

Mr. Gilles Duceppe (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, this is absolutely false. We are trying to save the small investors he made promises to, promises he is now reneging on. That is what we are trying to do. This is what he should do: change his mind about the millions of dollars he is saving the oil industry, with measures such as Bill C-48, which he supported and is now maintaining.

Will the Prime Minister act so that a carbon exchange can be put in place to reward industries that have made an effort and that have attained or are attaining greenhouse gas emission reduction targets? Those that have made no effort, such as the oil companies, must pay. This is called the polluter-pay principle.

Will he stop supporting his friends, the oil companies?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government is clear: our system will be based on the principle that the polluter will pay.

So why is the leader of the Bloc attacking both an industry in Alberta and an industry in Ontario? This is not really an environmental question.

The Bloc Québécois' only goal is to separate Quebec from Canada. We support a strong Quebec nation within a strong, united Canada.

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, in his speech yesterday, the Prime Minister said that he is for the environment, yet he always presents economic development and environmental action as competitors.

Do the Prime Minister's remarks not give away his close ties to major oil and automobile companies that do not believe in the Kyoto protocol?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have told my Bloc Québécois colleague that that is absolutely ridiculous. It was just one and a half months ago that the members of the Bloc Québécois voted with the government for a motion in favour of a united Canada.

The Bloc Québécois is now attacking the Quebec economy and the Alberta economy. Our government is trying to make regulations so that all regions of Canada will reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The environment is a higher priority for this government than for the previous government.

Mr. Bernard Bigras (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister says he is concerned about jobs. Yet, he

does not react to the overheating western economy, which has contributed to the rise of the dollar and thousands of lost jobs in Quebec's manufacturing sector.

Does the Prime Minister realize that if he truly understood the economics of the environment, he would adopt a balanced approach by setting absolute targets for greenhouse gas reductions and he would put some distance between himself and these oil company friends?

● (1430)

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have not met many Alberta oil companies. However, I would say that there is support for policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. We have clearly stated that our government will be the first to introduce air quality regulations based on greenhouse gases because it is important to all Canadians. In Montreal, air quality is another priority. This government will work very hard to improve Montreal's air quality.

* * *

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the students outside are suffering because of excessive debts. In Quebec, the Liberals are talking about ending the tuition freeze. This would be a step in the wrong direction; that much is clear.

The NDP introduced a bill that would guarantee stable and responsible federal transfers. The students also proposed their own solution, similar to a bursary system based on their needs.

Will the Prime Minister hear the call of our youth? Will he work to ensure that tuition costs go down, yes or no?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the leader of the NDP must know, tuition fees are determined by provincial policy. We hand over nearly \$5.4 billion annually for post-secondary education, including our increased tax credits for textbooks and scholarships. There is also new funding for student loans. We continue to give more money to the provinces for post-secondary education.

[English]

Hon. Jack Layton (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, policies like the textbook tax credit are regressive and are not going to solve the students' problems. They now are sitting with an average debt of \$24,000 on their shoulders. How did it come about?

In the mid-1990s when the Liberals cut the transfer payments, and we all know about that, they transferred the debt to the shoulders of our students, yet the government has absolutely no plan. It talks about the fiscal imbalance. What about the personal fiscal imbalance that our students are facing now? Why will the Prime Minister not come forward with a plan to restore the funding levels to pre-Liberal levels? That is what we need.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Again, Mr. Speaker, this government will spend nearly \$5.4 billion this year on post-secondary education, including additional transfers in the form of tax credits for scholarships and for textbooks, including more money for student loans, and including more post-secondary education infrastructure and investments in apprenticeship training.

What Canadian students need is some help. What they do not need are unrealistic promises like the federal government freezing provincial tuition fees, which they know full well the federal government cannot do.

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CHILD CARE

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Canadian families are in for a real shock when they fill out their tax returns and realize the \$100 a month baby bonus is actually taxable. A two income family in Ontario, each person earning \$40,000, will have to pay back the government \$31 a month per child.

That is a third of the money Canadian parents have already spent. My question is for the Prime Minister. How much money is the Prime Minister planning to make on their backs by taxing kids? Canadian parents want to know.

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can guarantee one thing, which is that Canadian families today are a lot better off because this Prime Minister and this finance minister moved to introduce the universal child care benefit that goes to 1.4 million families on behalf of 1.9 million children.

Do we know what the real shame is? What is the real shame is that the leader of the Liberal Party has stated unequivocally that he would take that money away from Canadian families. That is a disgrace.

Ms. Ruby Dhalla (Brampton—Springdale, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what is a real shame is that the government has not created a single child care space for the children of Canada. Let me tell members how much profit on the backs of Canadian families the Prime Minister is going to make: \$224 million from his so-called choice for parents and a \$400 million profit from cancelling the youth child supplement.

That is \$624 million, and Canadian parents do not have a single child care space, not one. When is the Prime Minister going to get the job done and start creating child care spaces?

• (1435)

Hon. Monte Solberg (Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the Liberals ever came back to power, God forbid, they would take away \$10 billion from Canadian families by removing the—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The Minister of Human Resources has the floor. I know his statements are very popular, but we have to be able to hear what the minister is saying. He has the floor. Order, please.

Hon. Monte Solberg: Mr. Speaker, the Liberal record on this is very clear. In their time in power, the Liberals refused to consider the idea that parents knew what was good for their children. That is why they opposed the universal child care benefit. That is why the leader of the Liberal Party has said that he would take that away from families. If he succeeds, that will be \$10 billion taken away from Canadian families over the next five years.

Oral Questions

GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, budget 2006 said the government was planning \$3.6 billion in meanspirited cuts, but to date it has outlined specifics on only \$1 billion in cuts to programs like literacy, women's equality and youth employment.

Given that this second wave of the cuts is supposed to begin in roughly 50 days, when will the government identify the next round of victims?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): As usual, Mr. Speaker, the premise is entirely wrong. The spending reductions that were made were announced previously. It is just as wrong, really, as the posturing on the other side of the House with respect to the income trusts issue. We know where the Bloc Québécois stands and we know where the NDP stands in support of that issue.

What we have from the Leader of the Opposition is this. He says that he spoke with “my best brains in our team”, the member for Wascana, the member for Markham—Unionville, and the member for Kings—Hants, and “they have ideas, but they urge me for now to not announce anything”.

I am asking the member opposite from Markham, as the president of the Liberal best brains club, to convene a meeting—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: The hon. member for Markham—Unionville.

[*Translation*]

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, clearly, the minister tried to change the subject because he does not understand his own budget. On page 23 of the budget, it says there will be cuts totaling \$3.6 billion over two years. The minister's press release announced cuts of \$1 billion, which means that there is still another \$2.6 billion to be announced in the next 50 days. The math is simple.

Who among Canada's most vulnerable citizens will be attacked this time?

[*English*]

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am disappointed that the president of the Liberal best brains club wants to cut spending against Canadians. I do not know why he wants to reduce spending against Canadians.

I can assure the member for Markham—Unionville and all members opposite that spending has been controlled this year. I know that is an objective with respect to which the opposition is unfamiliar, but we believe in controlled spending, and everyone, including the member for Wascana, will see in the budget that spending has been controlled in this fiscal year.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

CANADIAN TELEVISION FUND

Mr. Maka Kotto (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the behaviour of the Minister of Canadian Heritage in the Canadian Television Fund file is absolutely outrageous. She is condoning illegal acts that are compromising television production. Her government says it supports the legislation and the order. Well then, it should start by bringing order to the Canadian Television Fund.

What is the minister waiting for to fully enforce the law? It is her responsibility.

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member knows, the CRTC regulation actually requires the contribution. I am confident that the CRTC will ensure that its regulations are in force.

But we understand that there is a serious situation. That is why this government made an announcement of \$200 million over two years, and that production community said that the announcement "sends our industry and all Canadians a clear message that this government believes Canadian production is worthy of...support".

• (1440)

[Translation]

Mr. Maka Kotto (Saint-Lambert, BQ): Mr. Speaker, does the minister not realize that through her negligence she is condoning nothing short of illegality and that she is complicit in this hostage-taking directed against the television industry?

What is the Prime Minister waiting for to bring his minister into line and demand that she enforce the law?

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we understand. We have an independent organization that has the responsibility of regulating and supervising our broadcasting and production industries. The CRTC knows what its regulations are. The industry knows what regulations it serves under. I am confident the CRTC will act on behalf of all Canadians and for the government.

* * *

[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Ms. Francine Lalonde (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Mr. Speaker, last September representatives from Canada, the United States and Mexico met behind closed doors in Banff in order to develop a secret strategy to counter the public's resistance towards further integration of the three countries. Ministers, deputy ministers, senior government officials, ambassadors, influential members of the business world and top military personnel were present.

The Minister of Public Safety attended the meeting. I am asking him to tell us what was discussed at this meeting and what strategies he defended.

[English]

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Absolutely, Mr. Speaker. As I indicated to reporters to whom I

was returning calls on the very day I was at that particular meeting, I was pleased to be there to discuss a number of issues. Principally, I was concerned about the effects on the economy of the WHTI, the western hemisphere travel initiative, that the United States has been imposing.

I wanted to ensure that the Americans got a very clear message that this would have some negative effects on our economy and also on some of the social interaction at the border. I was glad to speak to that audience at that time.

[Translation]

Ms. Francine Lalonde (La Pointe-de-l'Île, BQ): Mr. Speaker, that certainly was not the only issue discussed that day.

Are we to understand that the government intends to avoid public debate and Parliament because it is afraid of the reaction of the public even though it is the one primarily concerned?

[English]

Hon. Stockwell Day (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, not at all and that is again why I was returning calls to reporters on the very day. I was doing it because I do not think we should be shy about the fact that we put Canada's sovereign interests first.

We speak up for the issues that concern all Canadians and we ensure that Americans and any other country that have a particular policy that may have a negative effect on Canada from coast to coast, we want to be there addressing it; unlike the Bloc Québécois who do not speak for all of Canada.

* * *

[Translation]

CANADIAN TELEVISION FUND

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we are still wondering when the Minister of Canadian Heritage will enforce the rules respecting the Canadian Television Fund and whether she still consults Shaw and Vidéotron board members such as Mr. Mulroney and Mr. Mazankowski.

Some television series may not be renewed, and many jobs are at risk.

Is the minister aware that her attitude is contributing to the collapse of our television industry and that she is putting Canada's cultural sovereignty at risk?

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I indicated, the government understands. There is a serious situation. We are working diligently. However, we have created, as a government, an independent agency that looks over a regulatory and supervisory role on behalf of Canadians. The CRTC regulations are outlined and the CRTC has a responsibility. As I said, I am confident that it will exercise its authority as necessary.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

Hon. Lucienne Robillard (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the minister's guilty silence is strangely troubling and shows her lack of concern about developing and spreading our culture.

Is she aware that in Quebec, the most successful series are the ones made right in our province? Has she herself ever even seen one? Does she realize that the government has a role to play in promoting culture? Does she know that this is an emergency and that she should immediately repair the damage she herself wrought by giving in?

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government has demonstrated in many areas that it knows that just words and talking is not enough. That is why we did act. We announced \$200 million over two years which is the first time the production industry has ever received a commitment beyond 12 months.

* * *

● (1445)

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Gary Merasty (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development told the House that his trip and four night stay at a luxurious hotel in Washington was very valuable.

However, documents we obtained show that his officials beg to differ. Here is what departmental staff said about the trip: "Much of the agenda in Washington is personal/political/non-INAC—".

If the minister wants to accomplish something very valuable, why does he not turn his attention to my people who are sleeping in shifts in mouldy overcrowded housing and maybe the child welfare crisis at the same time?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would encourage my friend to elevate the debate by speaking about some of the important issues surrounding the Mackenzie Valley pipeline, whether it is the negotiations with the Dehcho, the negotiations with the Dene Tha', or the Conservative \$500 million socio-economic fund.

My friend seems to be in a rut. I would remind him that the only difference between a rut and a grave is the depth.

Ms. Tina Keeper (Churchill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if the minister was in Washington promoting oil industry business, his department should not have picked up the tab for the trip.

This little non-INAC junket to hobnob with Washington elite was more than \$14,000 and INAC footed most of this bill. Why did the oilmen he was lobbying for not offer to pick up the tab?

When will the minister repay his department and turn his attention to the first nations housing, child welfare and water crises that all need his attention?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr.

Speaker, the member should know that the minister was carrying out his functions at the time. However, let us talk about appropriate travel.

The former minister of the environment had a chief of staff, Daniel Hurley. I am reading this public disclosure. It shows, and listen to the dates closely: December 15, 2005 to December 17, 2005, travel in the amount of \$1,547 to Edmonton; purpose: travel with minister for electoral campaign. I am prepared to table this and I would like an explanation from the opposition as to what this is all about.

* * *

[Translation]

AGRICULTURE AND AGRI-FOOD

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian dairy industry, in Quebec and in Ontario, was abandoned by the previous Liberal government. Dairy farmers are very worried about the increased use of milk proteins imported to make cheese. This has been a problem for too long and the Liberals did nothing. The Bloc member will never be able to do anything.

I would like to know what the Secretary of State for Agriculture can do for Quebec's dairy farmers in order to solve this problem.

Hon. Christian Paradis (Secretary of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his excellent question.

In fact today, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food announced to Canadian dairy farmers that this government is going to take action on behalf of the industry by invoking GATT Article 28 in order to increase the price schedules for milk protein concentrates.

This action is in response to the concerns of the dairy industry regarding the use of these concentrates. In addition, we will initiate a regulatory process with milk processors to establish standards for cheese ingredients.

After many years of Liberal inaction, this government is again proving that it is a strong supporter of supply management.

* * *

[English]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, 21 young people have tried to kill themselves in Kashechewan in a single month; the youngest was nine years old. There is no grade school in that community. There is no community centre. There is no youth support.

This is not a regional shame. This is not a national shame. Kashechewan has become a symbol of the utter hopelessness of our isolated reserves.

Oral Questions

I want to know what steps the minister will take to, number one, deal with this immediate crisis and, number two, live up to the signed agreement between the people of Kashechewan and the Government of Canada to move them to a site of their own choosing?

• (1450)

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Health and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. members knows, this is an incredibly serious issue and a dire situation. I can assure this House that Health Canada is on the scene with medical professionals. Indeed, we have additional funds this year alone to, unfortunately, deal with suicide crisis intervention services.

Of course, the previous Liberal government's record in terms of the treatment of first nations was appalling. We are attempting with alacrity to clean up that mess. However, in the meantime, we are going to be there for the citizens of Canada on that particular reserve, as indeed for all reserves.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the situation on our isolated reserves is so deplorable that international aide agencies like Save the Children are thinking of setting up an operation in Canada. What an indictment.

The children of Kashechewan do not even have a bloody school to go to. We have the same situation in neighbouring Attawapiskat where, after seven years, we are still dealing with bureaucratic rhetoric. No wonder these children do not believe they have a future.

What steps will the government take to ensure there is adequate educational resources for the Cree children of the northern territories?

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the situation in Kashechewan has been before this House for the last several years and it is a serious situation. We know that.

There was a Pope report that was commissioned by the government that examined the alternatives for the community. I would point out that the previous government had considered five sites. Four of them in fact flooded in the subsequent year, which tells us how much foresight went into that.

Chief Solomon, whom I have met with several times, has taken the Pope report to his community and we are waiting for the completion of that consultation process by the community.

* * *

MIDDLE EAST

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, according to access to information reports, there is no evidence that the \$13,000 that was spent by the Prime Minister's special adviser on the Middle East resulted in any report whatsoever.

In fact, government officials say, "after a thorough search through our files" there are no records of any actual report that were found. The only traces were a couple of phone conversations between officials and the adviser.

My question is for the Prime Minister. Did his special adviser produce a report, yes or no, and if he did, will he release it to Parliament?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to report that the member for Mississauga—Streetsville had a fruitful effort. He had a mandate to provide a report to the Prime Minister, which he did.

What is more interesting is why, if the members of the Liberal Party are so interested in his views now, they showed no interest in those views when he was a member of their caucus. That is the real question.

Hon. Keith Martin (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the government that it was the same member for Mississauga—Streetsville who promised all parliamentarians that he would release his report last October. So let us be clear that this \$13,000 was spent for just a few conversations and little else.

I would like again to ask the Prime Minister this question. Will he release this report or is he willing to admit that he wasted Canadian taxpayers' money on this con job?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the Liberal Party was in government, special advisers for foreign affairs were a way to give people a going away party. Just think about it. Jean Augustine, Sophia Leung were special advisers, but were their reports ever tabled? There was access to information, but they were never tabled.

We want to know why the Liberals have a double standard here. It is not surprising. They always have a double standard.

* * *

BYELECTIONS

Hon. Garth Turner (Halton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. member: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: Order, order. The hon. member for Halton now has the floor.

Hon. Garth Turner: Mr. Speaker, I had no idea they cared.

My question is for the Prime Minister. Will the Prime Minister support my request of yesterday to work immediately to have a byelection in my riding of Halton, and at the same time have byelections in Vancouver—Kingsway and Mississauga—Streetsville, so we three members can be accountable?

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: Order, please. We want to be careful not to waste any time in question period. The hon. government House leader has the floor. With all this noise, we are wasting time.

Oral Questions

•(1455)

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Halton has not been in the caucus for 24 hours and he has already received a standing ovation for the concept of him resigning.

I will assure the member for Halton that if he wishes to see a byelection in Halton, it is fully within his control. He can resign today and I am sure we will comply.

Hon. Garth Turner (Halton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to try again. If the Prime Minister will call a byelection today, so the people of Halton will not be without their member of Parliament for a few weeks, then I will lay my seat on the line today.

Will he do that, yes or no, and will he tell the member for Mississauga—Streetsville to get with the program?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I continue to be impressed but not surprised by the enthusiasm of the Liberal Party over the resignation of the member for Halton, but I think his 15 minutes of fame are over. If he wishes to have a byelection, that is 100% in his control.

The question is not why he changed his mind or how he explains his change in position, we need to know the answer to that. I do not know why he is asking us why we changed our mind. He is the one who has changed his position on these issues.

* * *

[Translation]

INDUSTRY

Mr. Paul Crête (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, BQ): Mr. Speaker, once again, the Minister of Industry is siding with telecommunications giants against consumers and is refusing to apply the principle of net neutrality, which guarantees identical upload or download speeds for anonymous blogs and big business websites alike. Real competition for sure.

Can the minister make a commitment, here in this House, not to make any decisions that would favour big businesses at the expense of consumers, thus ensuring that the Internet remains a democratic tool?

Hon. Maxime Bernier (Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, I would like to tell my Bloc Québécois colleague that, unlike the Bloc Québécois, we listen to consumers and we protect Quebecers. We have here an Ipsos-Reid poll saying that 75% of Quebecers support telecommunications reform. Not 50%, not 60%, but 75% of Quebecers support telecommunications reform. Why? Because they know that competition will lead to better prices and better services.

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AGENCY OF CANADA FOR THE REGIONS OF QUEBEC

Ms. Christiane Gagnon (Québec, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the science centres network came to the Hill on Monday to ask for recurring funding for, among other things, the exhibits at the 43 existing science interpretation centres in Canada.

In Quebec, we are still urging the federal government for funding in order to create such a centre.

Can the Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec assure us that the federal government is ready to provide funding for Quebec City's Boîte à science project, in order to contribute to the first stage in the development of such a centre?

Hon. Jean-Pierre Blackburn (Minister of Labour and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in response to the hon. member's question, I would like to inform this House that the hon. members from our party spoke a number of times, during the election campaign, of the importance of having the Boîte à science in the Quebec City and Lévis area. The authorities at the Boîte à science are well aware of our position.

The matter is currently under review. We are being asked for \$450,000 in order to proceed with the project's financing and our intention is not to be insensitive to this request.

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[English]

NORTHERN CLIMATE EXCHANGE

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the greatest impact of climate change in the world is on Canada's Arctic.

The Conservatives have claimed they are now finally concerned about the impacts of climate change, but on March 31 the government will close the Northern Climate Exchange which does important tracking and research both nationally and internationally. Why is the government again turning its back on the north?

There is still time for the minister to reverse his ridiculous decision. Will he commit to do that today?

•(1500)

Hon. John Baird (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the government recognizes the importance to act on greenhouse gas emissions. Climate change is having a huge effect not just on Canada, but particularly in our Arctic.

However, this government believes that the time has finished to talk about things, to study things, to reach into promoting things. The time has come to act. That is why this government is taking real action on climate change reduction. We introduced equal energy initiatives, more energy efficiency and more clean energy.

We have announced our intention to regulate both on greenhouse gases and on clean air. We are very proud of that.

*Points of Order***CHEMICALS MANAGEMENT PLAN**

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Mr. Speaker, part of our plan for a healthier environment for Canadians includes the chemicals management plan which challenges industry to provide the government with information about how it is safely managing 200 chemical substances.

Earlier today the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Health announced that we are moving forward on collecting this information as quickly as possible.

Could the Minister of Health update the House on the government's initiative to address the health of Canadians?

Hon. Tony Clement (Minister of Health and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would be happy to do so. Indeed, earlier today, through the challenge to industry, the new Government of Canada is moving on with separating 15 to 30 substances every three or four months and publishing the list in the *Canada Gazette*.

Industry is required to provide information on any of these substances in its possession within six months. The onus is on the industry to do this to show that these substances are safe for the environment and for human health.

This government is acting to protect the health of Canadians and to protect our environment, and we are proud to do so.

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TOBACCO MANUFACTURERS' SURTAX

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government can huff and puff all it wants, yet it goes ahead and proposes a tobacco tax credit to help only one person, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. We know this big tobacco tax cut is being doled out for only one reason, to get the minister re-elected.

Why can the Conservatives not just admit that they are playing pork with their friends and cancel the tax cuts for big tobacco?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I believe the member is referring to the tobacco manufacturers' surtax. This is an issue of tax fairness. The manufacturers' tax is just for that; it is for manufacturers of cigarettes and cigars. It is not designed for leaf processors. As a result, we have made a minor technical amendment to accomplish the goal. This tax ought not to have been imposed in the first place. It was a mistake and we have corrected that.

I can add that we maintain our policy against smoking. In fact, when we reduced the GST by one percentage point, we ensured that we raised the excise taxes so that the price of smoking would remain a deterrent in Canada.

Ms. Judy Wasylycia-Leis (Winnipeg North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is not about health and stopping tobacco; it is about pork politics. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration has to stand in the House today and explain how she had a tax break directed at only one federal riding, hers. That is quite an accomplishment. Some of us would like to know how she did it.

The only answer is that the minister is scared for her re-election efforts and padded her election war chest with a handy, too good to be true tax cut. She will remind people of that every day, every chance she gets.

How do ordinary Canadians benefit from this tax break?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is an issue of tax fairness. This is a tax that was designed for manufacturers of cigarettes and cigars.

I might add that I thank the Liberal member for Brant for his support on this issue.

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PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I wish to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Hon. Dennis Fentie, Premier of Yukon.

Some hon. members: Hear! Hear!

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POINTS OF ORDER

COMMENTS BY MINISTER OF CANADIAN HERITAGE

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday in response to a question from the member for Saint-Lambert in the House I made reference to a 2005 report from the heritage committee. I would like to now correct the record and acknowledge that there was in fact a dissenting report from the Bloc. I ask the House to accept my correction on the record. I regret the error.

• (1505)

DECORUM

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when the member for Halton rose with a question during question period, the member for Selkirk—Interlake twice made a vulgar arm gesture. In the name of re-establishing a modicum of decorum in the House, will the member for Selkirk—Interlake acknowledge the error of his ways and apologize to the House?

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure what I did. I am not completely sure what he is mentioning but if I made a rude hand gesture, I apologize. If it was taken offensively by the opposition members, then for sure I will definitely apologize.

COMMENTS BY MINISTER OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Tina Keeper (Churchill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my point of order has to do with when my colleague from Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River asked a question in the House. When he made reference to the dire living conditions of first nations in Canada, the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, who has a fiduciary responsibility to first nations, made a crass and offensive statement, one which I found crass and offensive, when he said he is in a rut and there is only a little difference between a rut and a grade.

When we are facing a child welfare crisis and, as another member mentioned in the House today, first nations children are in a suicide crisis, I think this is insulting, offensive, derogatory and shameful language and I would ask for his apology.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not believe there was anything unparliamentary in any of the language that was used and I would invite the Speaker to tell me otherwise.

The Speaker: I do not think there were any allegations of unparliamentary language in what we heard, but we will leave the matter there at the moment.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

TRAVEL EXPENSES

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I believe when the member for Churchill asked me a question, I responded with some information about travel expenses of the now Liberal leader when he was minister of the environment, actually his chief of staff, that were apparently for improper purposes; travel with the minister for electoral campaign was the stated purpose. I would be happy to table that.

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INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 34(1), I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, the report of the Canadian delegation of the Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association respecting its parliamentary mission to the country that will hold the next European Union presidency in Berlin, Germany, September 27 to 29, 2006 and its participation at the fourth part of the 2006 ordinary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe held in Strasbourg, France, October 2 to 6, 2006.

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have two reports to table today.

First, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 31st report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs relating to the electoral boundaries readjustment process. This report is the result of extensive studies over the last number of years by several members on my committee. In accordance with Standing Order 109, the committee requests a government response to this report within 120 days.

As well, I have the honour to present the 32nd report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs with respect to membership of committees of the House. With respect to the 32nd

Routine Proceedings

report, if the House gives its consent, I intend to move concurrence in the 32nd report later this day.

• (1510)

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 13th report related to Canadian museums, the 14th report related to the court challenges program and the 15th report related to the statutory review of the Canada Travelling Exhibitions Indemnification Act by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

SCRUTINY OF REGULATIONS

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 108(4) and Standing Order 123, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fourth report of the Standing Joint Committee on Scrutiny of Regulations.

This is a serious matter. The report contains a resolution for the disallowance of subsection 36.2(2) of the Ontario Fishery Regulations, 1989 as enacted by SOR/89-93 on the grounds that the provision is not authorized by the Fisheries Act, R.S., 1985, and that c. F-14 trespasses unduly on the rights, liberties and subject and makes an unusual and unexpected use of the powers conferred by Parliament.

Effectively, this basically says that there have been regulations in place that have not been enabled by the appropriate legislation and therefore the report is that they be disallowed.

* * *

HERITAGE LIGHTHOUSE PROTECTION ACT

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC) moved that Bill S-220, An Act to protect heritage lighthouses, be read the first time.

He said: Mr. Speaker, it is a honour to introduce Bill S-220 for first reading in this chamber. I would like to recognize the recent hard work and carriage of this bill by Senator Carney. I would be remiss if I did not mention the hard work and interest in preserving Canadian heritage by the late Senator Michael Forrestall.

I had the great honour to carry a version of the bill twice in this chamber. It was introduced by the late Senator Forrestall who had nothing but the interests of maritime Canada in his mind and in his heart when he sat in this chamber and when he sat in the Senate.

It is the intent of the bill to have as many as possible of Canada's existing 583 lights transferred to their community of interest.

(Motion deemed adopted and bill read the first time)

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Gary Goodyear (Cambridge, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the House gives its consent, I move that the 32nd report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs concerning the membership of committees of the House presented to the House earlier this day now be concurred in.

S. O. 52

[Translation]

The Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to move this motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

[English]

PETITIONS

WAR OBJECTORS

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to present a petition today from the War Resisters Support Campaign. This organization is petitioning the government to demonstrate its commitment to international law and the treaties to which it is a signatory by making provisions for U.S. war objectors to have sanctuary in this country.

This is clearly an issue in which Canadians overwhelmingly support the previous Liberal government's decision not to enter the war. Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien understood the realities of this conflict and the importance in this case of avoiding unilateral military action outside the conventions of the United Nations.

• (1515)

AFGHANISTAN

Mr. Mario Silva (Davenport, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I also rise to present a petition given to me by constituents in my riding of Davenport. They call upon the government to remove Canadian soldiers from Afghanistan immediately.

The continuing mission in Afghanistan is one that must be debated in this House. The Conservative government forced a vote on this issue with minimal debate. There was no time for discussions, compromise, consensus or education.

The Conservatives used procedures to deny Parliament and the Canadian people the full debate they deserved. Now we find out that they are planning to extend the mission beyond the two years without even consulting this House.

CANADA POST

Hon. Gurbax Malhi (Bramalea—Gore—Malton, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36 I have the honour to present the following petition from the constituents of Bramalea—Gore—Malton who call upon the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities to review Canada Post's recent decision to locate community mailboxes along formerly designated rural routes and restore home to home mail delivery and thus avoid threats to personal safety.

CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour today to present a petition signed by many members of my community.

My community members are concerned that the Raza family, which consists of six children under the age of 13, two of whom are Canadian citizens, and who have sought sanctuary in Crescent Fort Rouge Church in Winnipeg since August 2006, that their claim for refugee status has been denied and are waiting to hear for a humanitarian and compassionate application response.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to take action to prevent the deportation of the Raza family on these same humanitarian and compassionate grounds and ask the immigration minister to grant the outstanding permit that would allow them to do so.

LITERACY

Mr. Ken Boshcoff (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I present a petition from eight communities across Ontario: Atikokan, Kakabeka Falls, Lac La Croix First Nation, Nolalu, Ottawa, Sapawe, South Gillies and Thunder Bay.

The petition deals with the issue of literacy and the need for the reinstatement of the adult and youth literacy components to ensure that funding for these programs comes back for social and economic development and all the attentive needs of making it easier for all citizens to have access to all the things to which everyone else is entitled.

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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, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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MOTIONS FOR PAPERS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all notices of motions for the production of papers be allowed to stand.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE

MEXICO

The Speaker: The Chair has received a notice of a request for an emergency debate from the hon. member Scarborough—Agincourt. I will hear from him now.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, due to the number of Canadians who over the last year have been hurt or killed in Mexico and the Mexican government's seeming inability to investigate and solve those crimes, I feel that the House of Commons should undertake an emergency debate on this issue.

*Government Orders***GOVERNMENT ORDERS**

[English]

These tragic events have caused many Canadians to ask the government to issue a travel advisory for Mexico. To date, Canada's new minority Conservative government has refused the calls of Canadians and parliamentarians.

Today the Minister of Foreign Affairs is in Mexico. He has the opportunity to press this issue with his counterpart.

As the government has failed to safeguard Canadians while they are visiting Mexico, it is up to Parliament to ensure Canadians are warned of the perils they face while travelling to Mexico. Canadians want their government to take the necessary steps to safeguard them.

This morning the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Trade said in an interview that for a travel advisory to be issued:

I would suggest to you that Canadians would have to be targeted, and Canadians are not being targeted in Mexico.

Do Canadians have to paint a bull's eye on their foreheads? That is absolutely outrageous.

In a few days the universities will have a reading week and in a few weeks from now we will have March break. The Canadian government must ensure that Canadians are aware of the dangers they could face at their travel destinations.

I am, therefore, requesting an emergency debate on this issue. We must be responsible for Canadians and to Canadians.

• (1520)

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I sense that the parliamentary secretary wishes to make submissions on this. Normally, on an application for an emergency debate the Chair makes a decision based on the submissions of the member who made the request rather than encouraging a discussion about the merits or the virtues of having such a debate in the House among hon. members.

I have carefully considered the request from the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt. I have no doubt that the subject matter of the debate is one that would be of interest. On the other hand, in deciding whether this constitutes an emergency, I need to have some regard to the past practice of the House in this respect and, in my view, this request does not meet the exigencies of the Standing Order at this time.

I stress to the hon. member and others that there is a procedure available whereby the parties can agree to have a debate on subjects, take note debates on certain subjects if they wish to do so, and that can be done by agreement among the House leaders in the Chamber. We have had some of those, none recently, but we have had them. I encourage hon. members to work that venue as another possibility and avoid having the Chair decide that an emergency exists when I am not certain that the emergency, that is foreseen in some of the requests that are made, is one that meets, as I say, the exigencies of the Standing Order.

I thank the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt for his interest.

CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

Hon. Jim Prentice (Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC) moved that Bill C-44, An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to express my support for Bill C-44, An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act. Today my hon. colleagues have an opportunity to make Canada a more impartial and egalitarian society. The legislation now before us strives to end an unjust situation created when the Human Rights Act first came into effect 30 years ago.

Bill C-44 proposes to repeal section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act and thereby provide individuals, namely residents of first nation communities, with the same protection against discrimination long enjoyed by other Canadians. To understand the importance of repealing section 67, allow me to provide some context.

When the Canadian Human Rights Act was enacted in 1977, it was properly seen as a significant and progressive accomplishment for our country. The act furthered Canada's reputation as a respectful, democratic nation, dedicated to protecting the rights of its citizens. Observers from around the globe applauded Canada and our comprehensive approach to human rights protection. The Canadian Human Rights Act defines discrimination clearly and institutes a readily accessible investigative process that is open to public scrutiny.

The act not only prohibits discrimination based on 11 specific grounds, but also it provides the legal resource and recourse to citizens who feel that the federal government or institutions operating under federal jurisdiction have violated their rights. Under the act, it is forbidden to discriminate based on age, race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, mental or physical disability or pardoned conviction.

To investigate and adjudicate alleged acts of discrimination, the act establishes two bodies: the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal. Over the past three decades, the Canadian Human Rights Act has served to strengthen democracy in our country.

Unfortunately, not all Canadians enjoy equal access to the legal instruments provided by the Canadian Human Rights Act. Section 67 states:

Nothing in this Act affects any provision of the Indian Act or any provision made under or pursuant to that Act.

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This sentence simply and effectively denies some Canadians access to the remedies granted in the act. Section 67 shields the Indian Act and any decisions made or actions taken under the Act from application of the Canadian Human Rights Act. In effect, section 67 puts into question our claim to be a fair and egalitarian society.

When the Canadian Human Rights Act was debated in the House and reviewed in committee, the presence of section 67 elicited many objections. The exemption it granted, though, was accepted at the time as a temporary measure, one that would be rescinded once reforms to the Indian Act were completed. In fact, however, the kind of extensive reform of the Indian Act that was anticipated, and so greatly needed, in the 1970s has still not come. Later, more focused attempts to repeal section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, in the form of both government sponsored legislation and a private member's bill, died on the order paper.

Today the exemption remains in place, creating a twisted irony of sorts: legislation designed to promote equality effectively sanctions discrimination. Under section 67, thousands of Canadians cannot fully avail themselves of the legal instruments that combat discrimination. What is particularly disturbing is that section 67 affects many of Canada's most vulnerable citizens, residents of first nation communities.

Among other matters, the Indian Act stipulates how first nation communities are governed, how Indian status is defined and how reserve lands are administered. Under section 67, potentially discriminatory decisions made by agencies mandated by the Indian Act, such as band councils and school boards as well as the federal government itself, are exempted from the Canadian Human Rights Act. These decisions often touch on crucial aspects of day to day life, such as education, housing, registration and the use and occupation of reserve lands. We must take immediate action to remove this fundamental inequality.

• (1525)

Most Canadians recognize that huge gaps exist in the quality of life experienced by aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in our country. The government is determined to close these gaps and make tangible, sustainable progress on the full range of aboriginal issues. To do so, I believe we must address root causes, and there is no doubt that inadequate legal frameworks exacerbate many key problems. I am pleased to report that a collaborative effort is underway to design and implement appropriate legal frameworks.

Prior to our last adjournment, members of the House accorded speedy passage to Bill C-34. The legislation grants first nations in British Columbia greater control of on reserve education and encourages improved education outcomes through appropriate partnerships among first nations and with provincial educational bodies.

A series of consultations is underway to recommend legislative options to resolve the difficult issue of on reserve matrimonial real property, something that our minister has championed since the day he took office. Another consultative process that is ongoing is aimed at improving the quality of drinking water. This has been proposed through legislative options, which can lead to putting appropriate standards into law.

I am convinced that the repeal of section 67 is an important building block in a renewed legislative framework that can enable aboriginal peoples to participate fully in the prosperity of our country.

Bill C-44 has three main components.

The first repeals section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, something that has been in place for some 30-odd years now.

The second commits Parliament to conduct, within five years, a review of the effects of this repeal, and this is important to consider.

The third component provides six months to prepare for the application of the repeal to first nations. In essence, for the first six months following royal assent, the exemption granted to first nations under section 67 would remain in place. While some parties have called for a longer delay period, in my view, after 30 years access to these important rights protections cannot and should not be delayed any further.

For first nations, adapting and responding to the Canadian Human Rights Act regime is a process that will evolve over the years, just as it has for institutions to which the act currently applies.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission has already established an aboriginal program to give specific attention to the unique needs and circumstances of aboriginal communities as they relate to the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Employment Equity Act.

The six month delay will provide for a focused period during which the Canadian Human Rights Commission will inform first nations about the Canadian Human Rights Act and begin to work with them to develop culturally appropriate community redress mechanisms, if they so wish. The Government of Canada, though, would be subject to the act once Bill C-44 received royal assent as there would be no six month delay.

The simplicity of the legislation before us belies the valuable impact it will have on the residents of first nation communities. Bill C-44 would give full legal protection to the rights of thousands of Canadians for the very first time. It would enable them to challenge and adjudicate potential cases of discrimination that may exist currently on reserves.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission fully supports Bill C-44 and has declared itself ready and able to help first nations deal with the repeal of section 67. Its work with first nations will not simply end after the six month delay period. The Canadian Human Rights Act authorizes the commission to establish guidelines on how to interpret particular types or groups of complaints.

Government Orders

• (1530)

I fully expect that the commission will work closely with first nations to explore and develop appropriate interpretive policies, guidelines and regulations, helping first nations build the capacity to address the new avenues provided for the protection of their citizens, avenues that have long been available for the rest of Canadians. I know all first nations families would be interested in seeing this come to pass.

As I noted previously, another mechanism to ensure that Bill C-44 does not cause any group undue hardship in including itself, we have included this in the legislation. A parliamentary standing committee must conduct a thorough and open review of the impact that this repeal will have on first nations after five years have passed. The committee must also submit a full and public report to the House of Commons.

The Canadian Human Rights Act has become a cornerstone of Canada's democracy and today we have the opportunity to ensure that it applies to all Canadians, first nation Canadians, so all citizens can be treated with equal respect and dignity before the law.

I urge the members of the House to support Bill C-44.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in my colleague's remarks he talked about the importance of addressing root causes. He views, as I do, a human rights violation as an important issue. However, human rights violations often come about because of root causes, like the lack of housing, the lack of water, the lack of a bed to sleep in and the lack of an appropriate educational facility.

Could my colleague opposite talk about root causes as they apply to human rights violations?

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Mr. Speaker, the root cause we see so often on reserve, which has led to many issues that we all have become familiar with as we spend time working with first nations, is that the system itself has been very restrictive of first nations citizens from achieving true liberty in Canada.

I know the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development is very interested in seeing systemic improvement and this is one of the first steps in that process to improving the system by opening up opportunities for first nations people to be able to access the laws that so many of us in Canada take for granted every day.

This is something that unfortunately has been set aside for so many years, something that the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development has done within one year of becoming a minister. It is something of which I am very proud.

• (1535)

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to raise one concern. It is my understanding that there is a concern among the first nations that the Conservative government is trying to erode first nation rights. They were very concerned with the fact that the legislation was introduced without completing the consultations with the first nations.

Why was there such a rush? Why did the government not complete the consultative process?

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure one could consider 30 years a rush. This has been in the making for a very long time. The section 67 exemption was considered to be only a temporary measure back when it was introduced in 1977. We need to act for the sake of first nation citizens on reserve who do not have access to the very important human rights laws that we have in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened very carefully to the parliamentary secretary's comments. I would like to point out to him—this is rather bizarre—that the current government is using pressure from the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to justify coming back with this bill, in order to eliminate a section that, I feel, completely discriminates against first nations peoples. I will come back to this in a moment.

First off, following that small comment, I wanted to ask the parliamentary secretary if he heard the statements made by the Assembly of First Nations of Canada. Furthermore, what does he intend to do or recommend to the committee concerning the famous interpretation clause that first nations peoples would like to see before Bill C-44 is enacted, if it passes?

[*English*]

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague, the hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue, for all of his input at committee over the last year, which has been very helpful to the government.

As I said in my address, this repeal will be coming before committee. At committee, of course, we will be looking at all suggestions in relation to its implementation. I know there will be submissions from various quarters, likely including AFN. However, I must say that human rights are deserved on first nations reserves. It is something that I think we in Canada truly understand and that I am looking forward to seeing implemented.

Ms. Tina Keeper (Churchill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member keeps to referring to 30 years. We all know that it was almost 30 years ago that the Canadian Human Rights Act was introduced as law.

Could the member indicate when throughout that 30 years there has been consultation with first nations? As we know, it is the premise for a collaborative partnership and relationship with and between first nations and is actually the basis of human rights. When in that 30 years has there been a consultation process with first nations and the Government of Canada?

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Mr. Speaker, as a new parliamentarian, of course, I have been part of this process for only the last year, but as I indicated, past attempts were made to repeal section 67. There was also a private member's bill.

There is going to be an opportunity before committee for further additions or changes to this repeal. However, I think it is still fundamental. It is something that we as Canadians have all taken for granted. It is something that first nations citizens have not had the opportunity to experience on reserve. This is very timely and needed.

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• (1540)

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if passed into law, Bill C-44 would change the way that decisions are made in the aboriginal community. Human rights protection is very important, but the point I was trying to make with my last question is that even though we keep hearing about 30 years, it will take time to take this on issue and gain the trust of this community. I will repeat my point that I do not believe the minister gave enough time to establish that relationship of trust as needed.

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Mr. Speaker, there is something that the minister, the government and I have done on many occasions, and that is not to use consultation as an excuse to not act.

This is one of those cases where acting is essential. It is important that we not let this continue to be put off into the future. We have an opportunity. All of us cannot necessarily guarantee that we are going to be here for countless decades. In fact, that probably would not be a good thing for any of us. We have to take the time that we are given and act, and act appropriately, and that is what we are doing with this repeal.

Ms. Dawn Black (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a question around the issue of collective rights versus individual human rights. The member who has been speaking will know that there has been a lot of concern within first nations communities about that issue. I have a question for the member. Does this legislation protect both collective human rights and individual human rights for first nations peoples?

Mr. Rod Bruinooge: Mr. Speaker, the member makes an interesting point. Of course we see it in other situations when individual rights in a democracy come up against the rights of the larger community. In this case, though, I think the Canadian Human Rights Act will be judicious in the way that it is implemented. It is going to take into account situations where individuals have their human rights affected. Of course the Government of Canada is supportive of first nations communities and their traditions, but I believe this is the approach that needs to be taken.

Hon. Anita Neville: Mr. Speaker, I believe if you seek it you would find that there is unanimous consent for me to split my time with the member for Churchill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Is it agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anita Neville (Winnipeg South Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me begin by saying that those of us on this side of the House will not take a back seat to anyone on human rights. I am very proud to be part of a group and a community that has championed human rights, a party that has enshrined in Canadian society the right to freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom of the press, to name but a few.

However, I listened to my colleague opposite, and before I get into the substance of the bill, I want to remind him that while his Conservative government has indeed introduced legislation to right a legislative wrong, it has to do more. We cannot talk about addressing human rights issues without addressing the human rights needs of individuals, such as housing, drinking water and education.

As we know, the Kelowna accord addressed many of these human rights needs of first nations. The actual negotiation for Kelowna took place over 18 months between 2004 and 2005. It focused on building a more promising future for aboriginals. It set aside more than \$5 billion over that period to close the gaps in the needs that we expect all Canadians to have: the human rights needs of a safe place to live, a bed to sleep in, education, housing and economic opportunities.

In my view, it is a profound breach of faith that the minority Conservative government decided to break a promise made by the previous government, a solemn promise made to the leaders of the nation's five most prominent aboriginal groups.

If we are going to strengthen democracy, we cannot ignore the human rights needs of our first nations people that go beyond the legislative need to file a human rights complaint.

I will acknowledge that there has been a hole in the Human Rights Act, a hole that needed to be and should have been filled by previous governments.

When I speak of section 67 of the Human Rights Act, I acknowledge that it was designed to be in place for only a temporary period of time. That temporary period of time, we have heard, has been 30 years. It is time that steps are taken to extend to aboriginal peoples on reserve what those of us not on reserve take for granted, that is, the ability to file a human rights complaint when we feel that our rights are being abused.

However, while I support the intent of the legislation, and I want to underline the fact that I support it, I do have some concerns.

The first concern I want to raise has been raised by one of my colleagues in questioning. In keeping with its pattern of operation, the Conservative government has yet again failed to recognize and acknowledge that the time period in which the federal government would dictate policy to aboriginal people is behind it. It is no more.

We do not impose any more without consulting. Why the government would choose to operate in this way is beyond me. There has been no consultation. There has been no forewarning. There has been no discussion with first nations. There has simply been a decision made to do it and say that it is time to impose it. That is not the way to do business with first nations.

Previous reports that examined the effect of repealing section 67 of the Human Rights Act have made it clear that a transition and implementation period is necessary in order to effectively acclimatize first nations for the legislation. The Human Rights Commission, which we all know of and is well regarded, recommended that the transition and implementation period be a minimum of 18 months and up to 30 months. Other groups have also recommended an implementation and transition period of 30 months.

• (1545)

Did the government consider this when it drafted its recommendations? Did it consider what the Human Rights Commission had to say? Did it ask first nations how long they thought they needed before being adequately prepared? It appears not. It seems that they plucked a number out of the air and said that first nations have six months to prepare.

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We know that most first nations do not have the resources or capacity to cope with the potential exposure to liability or to undertake measures to reduce risk. We know that in the bill the government has neglected to mention any resources that will be allocated to capacity building. There must be a capacity both to respond to and to prevent human rights violations.

Also, as it relates to the repeal of section 67, the government has chosen to ignore the matter, and again it has been raised here today, of an interpretive clause. By so doing, the government has once again said that it knows best. It has ignored the advice of the Human Rights Commission and the will of first nations, which both say that an interpretive clause is a necessary inclusion in any legislation dealing with section 67.

The purpose of the clause would be to assist the Human Rights Commission in adjudicating claims against first nations governments, agencies and institutions. In previous submissions on the repeal of the section, the Assembly of First Nations has strongly advocated for the inclusion of such a clause. It does so to ensure that their concern in maintaining an appropriate balance, which again we heard raised earlier today, a balance between collective rights and individual rights, is maintained, and consequently the tradition of collectivity carries on for future governments. Again the government has chosen to bypass this. Before Bill C-44 is finalized, there must be an accommodation for an interpretation clause.

Yet another concern as it relates to the repeal of section 67 is the impact it will have on aboriginal and treaty rights. The constitutional analysis and effect related to the repeal is unknown and needs to be examined before moving forward with the bill. We have heard that will happen in five years. It seems to me that this is putting the cart before the horse. Usually in all other areas when we implement legislation, we need to know what the impact will be, and then we move forward. We seem to be doing it backwards this time.

Another concern is the issue of jurisdiction and who is best able to deal with the issues of human rights complaints on reserves. In its report on section 67, again the Human Rights Commission suggests the possibility of the enactment of a first nations human rights commission and tribunal. Its idea, which I believe the Assembly of First Nations has endorsed enthusiastically, is nowhere to be seen in the legislation. The establishment of such a commission and tribunal would go a long way to addressing the concerns.

From the outset, I say on behalf of my party that we support the intent of the legislation. Our support for the purpose of the legislation, the extension of rights, is consistent with the Liberal Party's activities over the years from Confederation to today. However, I do have to note the irony that the same government that rushes to introduce the legislation is also responsible for successfully lobbying for the abandonment of the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples.

I agree that the same rights need to be extended across this country to every person. The fact that the legislation will extend the ability to file human rights claims is long overdue, but I repeat that there are concerns that need to be addressed. There are matters of consultation. There are matters of implementation. There are matters of capacity. There are matters of an interpretive clause. There is the

matter of the analysis on the impact on treaty and aboriginal rights. Also, there is the whole issue of operation.

I look forward to seeing this piece of legislation go to committee. There is much work to be done in committee before it can be brought back to the House for a successful conclusion.

• (1550)

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her support in theory for what we are attempting to do with section 67, and for her submission, although I have a question for her. It could be likely, unfortunately, that human rights violations are occurring on first nations reserves right now. I hope that is not the case, but it could very well be the case. Any amount of time that we extend in the process of transitioning this repeal will be simply an extension of those violations continuing, so I ask her, why should we make it longer than it needs to be?

Hon. Anita Neville: Mr. Speaker, human rights violations are being committed in first nations communities right across this land of ours. Human rights violations are being committed when someone does not have adequate housing, when someone does not have safe water, when someone does not have the opportunity to go to school, when someone does not have the opportunity to develop a skill. There are human rights violations which the government is choosing to ignore over and over and over again.

We know that any initiative by government is bound to fail unless it is done properly. To do it properly is to talk about doing a consultation with those most affected, to talk about an appropriate implementation plan, to look at all of the risks associated with implementation.

The last thing we want to do is to set something up for failure. My belief is that rushing it through this way will do just that.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the speech given by my colleague, who, I would like to underscore before the House, is doing terrific work on the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development. I have a very specific question for her. She knows from committee that I ask very specific questions.

Does she believe that this bill will focus on individual rights rather than group rights, when we talk about eliminating section 67 and replacing it with Bill C-44?

What position will she take on this bill once it goes to committee? A very serious matter concerning the rights of individuals in relation to group rights will then have to be debated.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre should note that I would also like to allow another question from a member of the New Democratic Party.

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Hon. Anita Neville: Mr. Speaker, I cannot give a definitive response to my colleague's question. There is uncertainty as to the implication for individual over collective rights. That is why I spoke about the need for an important analysis to be done before we pass this legislation. I said that the government seems to be doing it backwards. We need to know what it is going to mean before we move forward.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): The hon. member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek should know that there is a minute for both the question and the answer.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be brief.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission has expressed concerns. Its report calls for a two stage implementation. Would the member not agree that there is a serious flaw in this legislation that does not take in the cultural differences for the band councils to prepare for this implementation?

Hon. Anita Neville: Mr. Speaker, I thought that I had addressed that in my comments. Yes, there is a real concern when we rush with a six month implementation period of something of this sort.

The Canadian Human Rights Commission has called for an 18 to 30 month implementation period to allow for the accommodation and the necessary adjustments. Others have called for an openness so that should more time, even more than 30 months, be necessary, that it be available. My colleague has raised an important question and I thank him.

Ms. Tina Keeper (Churchill, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is a critical and important debate looking at the human rights of first nations citizens in our country. The Canadian Human Rights Act is not only based on principles upheld in this country but on international human rights principles and practices for which we are leaders on the world stage. As Canadians we are very proud.

Today I am also proud to contribute to the debate at second reading of Bill C-44, an act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act. The intention of the bill is to effectively repeal section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, which reads as follows:

Nothing in this Act affects any provision of the Indian Act or any provision made under or pursuant to that Act.

The Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development stated:

Since its inception, section 67 has been the subject of numerous calls for repeal, including calls from the United Nations Human Rights Committee and the Canadian Human Rights Commission, as well as from Canada's national Aboriginal organizations. Today, this Government is moving forward to finally repeal section 67 to ensure that all Aboriginal people have the same access to human rights protections as all other Canadians.

The member for Provencher, when he was minister of justice, stated:

The repeal of section 67 represents an important step in furthering and enhancing the individual human rights protection enjoyed by all Canadians.

The departmental background states:

Section 67 was part of the Canadian Human Rights Act when the Act was introduced in 1977. At the time, discussions were underway with Aboriginal groups about possible reforms to the Indian Act. Section 67 was originally adopted as a temporary measure because it was recognized that the application of the Canadian Human Rights Act to all matters falling under the Indian Act could have resulted in certain provisions of the Indian Act being found discriminatory before the

discussions with Aboriginal groups about reforming the Indian Act had concluded. Since its inception, however, section 67 has been the subject of numerous calls for repeal—

As was stated by my colleague and by the member opposite, the intention of this bill, to address the issue of human rights for first nations in Canada, is indeed something which I am also in agreement with, but I have serious concerns with the process indicated in Bill C-44. Given that Churchill riding has a high first nations population, I want to ensure that my constituents have a voice in this critical debate.

We have heard from the parliamentary secretary that the issues and concerns surrounding section 67 have been around for the past 30 years and since its inception it has been the subject of numerous calls for repeal. First nations and aboriginal groups have also made statements and have positions on this issue as well.

As a whole, first nations have voiced their commitment to human rights. They have long-standing traditions, cultures and laws, respecting human rights, both individual and collective. Indeed they have been here for thousands of years.

When the Canadian Human Rights Act became law, the unique circumstances and perspectives of first nations were recognized in the exemption of the Indian Act bands through section 67. It was never intended to be long term but it was expected that the government would engage the first nations and respectfully and appropriately reflect first nations interests and perspectives relating to human rights. That the Government of Canada intends to forcefully move ahead to repeal the section without due regard to the first nations position as voiced is a deep concern.

●(1600)

There was also a recommendation for a consultation process in the October 2005 special report by the Canadian Human Rights Commission entitled "A Matter of Rights". It recommended the repeal of section 67. It recommended that:

The repeal legislation [must] include provisions to enable the development and enactment, in full consultation with First Nations, of an interpretative provision, which will take into consideration the rights and interests of First Nations.

If we are considering human rights, then it must be in that spirit that Canada work alongside first nations. How critical is this? How necessary is it for the government to fully consult with first nations on this legislation and how it relates to their future and their well-being?

We have heard over and over again in this House about the dire living conditions of first nations. The government must also fully appreciate the potential impacts on aboriginal and treaty rights that this bill may have. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples stated that aboriginal peoples must have the room to exercise their autonomy and structure the solutions.

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We are talking about a position by first nations, recommendations, and consultation between first nations and government, and more specifically, the drafting and approval of an interpretative provision on section 67. The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, which represents 33 first nations in my riding, has recommended that any proposed interpretative provisions not become merely guidelines or policy but a legislative provision, legally binding, and also that this process be first nations specific.

We have heard from other members today about the concerns on collective rights that first nations have continually maintained and to achieve a sustainable solution for all first nations citizens. I have mentioned many of these elements in previous speeches, but unfortunately, I have to repeat myself.

In May 2005 an agreement was signed by the Assembly of First Nations and the then Liberal government, the First Nations-Federal Crown Political Accord on the Recognition and Implementation of First Nations Governments. It laid a framework for a collaborative federal policy development process that would guarantee first nations participation. Bill C-44 was not a result of this collaborative process as guaranteed by this accord.

While the bill actually has a transition provision, it does not explicitly contain any terms for a delay period in order to establish issues relating to implementation. Bill C-44 does provide a six month period of immunity for first nations from complaints as outlined in clause 3 of the bill.

Most first nations lack the resources to manage the new exposure to liability they would face if Bill C-44 was adopted or to undertake ameliorative measures to minimize potential risks. A six month immunity period will not change this situation. It will only defer the inevitable flood of complaints that will follow after a six month delay period when our communities are facing chronic housing shortages and limited access to and services for disabled people. First nations require the financial resources to minimize or eliminate potential exposure to the risk of complaints. We must first ensure that first nations are provided with adequate resource mechanisms and institutions to fulfill their new responsibilities and risks.

I agree with the intent of this bill, but I have serious concerns about the process and the lack of consultation with first nations and aboriginal groups such as the Native Women's Association of Canada. That association has voiced concerns as well about the lack of consultation in this process.

• (1605)

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I noted with interest the comments of my colleague. She did acknowledge that this provision was put in as a temporary measure over 30 years ago. She also indicated that she has major concerns with the lack of consultation.

I am sure she is aware that in 1999 there was a lot of consultation all across Canada with a number of aboriginal people who represented many different national and regional organizations. Input was received from many different people, including the National Association of Women and the Law and the Native Women's Association of Canada. A number of other organizations were also consulted.

In addition, in 2005 the Canadian Human Rights Commission held discussions with aboriginal groups in the preparation of its special report on section 67.

How much consultation does my colleague envision would be adequate? Would another 30 years be appropriate, or is it time to quit our consultations and take some action that would actually advance the cause of aboriginal peoples in Canada?

Ms. Tina Keeper: Mr. Speaker, I find it somewhat offensive that the member opposite would infer that there has been a 30 year consultation process. Indeed, we all know that the Indian Act has been in place and has been the source of much deliberation on how to move forward between first nations and the Canadian government to ensure first nations can participate in a society that provides equality and a standard of living.

What we are talking about is many years of inequity. I am not sure specifically about what consultation period the member was talking. I have a joint press release from the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Women's Association of Canada, issued on December 13, 2006, in which they state, "We support the repeal in principle, but only after proper consultation".

National Chief Phil Fontaine has said:

The Government of Canada has not consulted First Nations, even though this action was anticipated almost three decades ago...Now, the government intends to simply repeal this section without due regard to the unique legal context and development of associated capacity for First Nations relating to the CHRA. This is simply a recipe for ineffectiveness and will add new costs for First Nations governments already under-resourced.

I will also quote the Native Women's Association of Canada President, Bev Jacobs, who also said in this press release:

We believe that the repeal of Section 67 without engaging in meaningful consultations with Aboriginal peoples could only lead to disaster...We are still dealing with the aftermath of Bill C-31, which was a result of not having meaningful consultation with First Nations, including Aboriginal women.

In answer to the member's question, I am not exactly sure about what consultation he is talking. I will be very happy to hear about the consultation processes. Perhaps the member could table a report or table the information and ensure that we have it on this side of the House. Certainly the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Women's Association of Canada do not seem to agree that there was a proper or meaningful consultation on this issue.

• (1610)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Royal Galipeau): Just a note to the hon. member for Churchill, this is a five minute period for questions and comments. We have now burned more than four minutes. There is now 40 seconds left for the hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue to ask a question and to give you a chance to answer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, you will see that I can ask a question in under 10 seconds.

Government Orders

In the member's opinion, when we study Bill C-44, should we focus on individual rights or collective rights?

[*English*]

Ms. Tina Keeper: I apologize, Mr. Speaker. That is a part of the consultation process. This is an integral discussion in terms of the consultation process that Canada should be engaged in with first nations and aboriginal people.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the member for Churchill has given me the perfect introduction.

First, I would like to point out that the fundamental debate in the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development will focus on the issue of individual rights vs. collective rights.

I would also like to point out that today, February 7, is the anniversary of a historic moment. I do not know if the Speaker and the members are aware of this, but exactly five years ago today, Quebec Premier Bernard Landry signed the Peace of the Braves, an agreement enabling the James Bay Cree to achieve the development they are currently enjoying. I wanted to point out the anniversary of this event that was so important to the development of relations between Quebec and first nations in the province.

The federal government should use the Peace of the Braves as a model for important agreements with first nations in the rest of Canada. One of these documents and one of these important matters is the one we will begin examining today, Bill C-44.

Why did I say earlier that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is important? It is important because the Canadian Human Rights Act is a fundamental law.

We lawyers know that, generally, the rights of individuals take precedence over collective rights. Before this bill was introduced, there was one exception, namely, section 67, which stated that the Canadian Human Rights Act did not apply to first nations peoples.

Complaints can be filed. I think it is important to underscore from the beginning that complaints can be filed if an individual feels he or she has been discriminated against based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex—including pregnancy and birth—sexual orientation, marital or family status, mental or physical disability—including existing or past addiction to alcohol or drugs—and conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted.

Why did I bother to articulate such a list? Because Bill C-44 will have a considerable impact on first nations peoples, who should be directly concerned about the application of this bill.

I think we must not be too hasty to pass this bill quickly, without first understanding all the consequences it will have on first nations peoples.

The Bloc Québécois, for which I am the critic for Indian Affairs and Northern Development, agrees that this bill should be studied in committee, where we must examine the impact this bill will have—because it will have an impact.

I looked at the documents sent to us for consultation. The bill itself is very short; it has only three clause. I think the impact of the bill will be considerable, given that previous governments have

already tried in the past to repeal this famous section 67, which has been around since 1977.

• (1615)

It is not complicated. Since 1977, aboriginals have been excluded from the application of important legislation. In 1999 and 2002, there were attempts to adopt legislation to abolish section 67. In 1999, an independent review tribunal conducted a thorough study.

As I am sure you will understand, there is no way the Bloc Québécois will support a study to study the study that studied previous studies of the application of section 67.

As someone I know—me—would say, we will move on to more serious things as soon as the House consents to let the committee study this bill. I am saying this not only to first nations, but also to the government. They will have to have done their homework before appearing before us, before the committee that will study Bill C-44.

Why am I saying this? Because the Assembly of First Nations sent its recommendations to committee members. I have a question for the government. I began asking the parliamentary secretary earlier, but he dodged the question. Maybe it was the interpretation or maybe my question came at him too fast for him to understand it, but now I will make it very clear: How will the government interpret the clause or introduce a clause to interpret section 67?

The government has to be able to answer that. If individual rights prevail, if the government intends to give individual rights precedence over collective rights, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development will have to undergo some major anti-aging treatment in administering the budgets allocated to it because it will find itself before the courts on what will likely be almost a daily basis. Imagine if, all of a sudden, tomorrow morning, individual rights were to take precedence. Let us say I am a person living on a reserve who does not have running water and is therefore deprived of adequate housing, so I take the government to court. That is how it will be for a very long time with a lot of issues.

However, if the government were to decide that collective rights take precedence for first nations, how would it explain to the general population that collective rights take precedence for first nations only?

Would that not leave the door wide open for citizens in the rest of Canada to take the government to court claiming it is not complying with its own law?

What I mean to say, after that little digression, is that even the government will have to do its homework and appear before the committee with real, practical solutions.

Government Orders

• (1620)

When I look at what the Canadian Human Rights Act covers, I do not know how the government is going to deal with the issue of marital status. People are currently discussing land-related rights on reserves, the rights of aboriginal women who do not enjoy equal rights. Are these individual rights? If so, the government is going to have to get its act together and allocate money accordingly. And will that put an end to first nations governance as we know it? These are important issues.

For once, I think that the government wants to go ahead with a bill that will drastically change how things are done in aboriginal communities in Canada, in Quebec and even in the far north. This afternoon, I am not certain whether the minister or the first nations have considered all the impacts of this legislation.

I can assure you that, starting this evening, I am going to read the reports that have already been tabled. Those on the committee who know me know that I will. I am going to read them so that the same reports cannot be tabled a second time as if they were new, but especially so that I can say that, from now on, things have to be done differently.

I look at the bill and I see that it does not explain what sort of review will be conducted under clause 2 of Bill C-44. For the time being, we do not know how the government will act. I do not have the answers today, but I would like to have them before I get to the committee. If we leave it to the parliamentary committee to determine how exactly this work will be done, the committee could be left with little time to consider the impacts of abolishing section 67.

I respectfully submit that this is important legislation, even though it has only two clauses. Despite its brevity, it would put an end to a temporary situation that has gone on for 30 years. That is quite powerful. If this bill is adopted by the House of Commons, everyone will have to realize that life will never be the same for the first nations or the minister. The question that I am asking myself but cannot answer is whether the government anticipated that things would never be the same. And is that what the government wants? This is important.

We will support this bill, so it can be examined in committee. We feel it is important to learn not only what first nations peoples want, but more importantly, whether they are ready to deal with the repeal of section 67 and to be subject to the act. Beginning immediately and as soon as the bill is passed, how will they be ready to deal with the act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act?

I feel this is important, with respect to aboriginal women and governance.

• (1625)

In my opinion—based on what I have read and my interpretation thus far—by repealing section 67 with this bill, the government wants to have an impact on first nations governance. I would remind the government that a bill was introduced in 2002, but it never passed. The government must be prepared, with its consultations of first nations peoples, to face the music.

I would now like to speak to first nations peoples directly. In my opinion, first nations peoples should agree to be subject to this act. I think it is important to say that the status quo is no longer viable. First nations peoples, first nations children and first nations women tell us that enough is enough and we must move forward. I do not necessarily believe that we have to move very, very quickly, before we have the chance to study all the implications of such a bill, but I think we should go ahead with this bill and that everyone must be prepared to deal with the ramifications.

Today, on February 7, I am not sure that the government or the first nations peoples are prepared to deal with this change, which is not just a legal change, but a change that necessarily requires a change in mentality. People have to get it in their heads that effective immediately, human rights must be respected within the first nations, the same way they are in other segments of the population of Canada and of Quebec.

In my opinion, and in the opinion of the Bloc Québécois, this legislation is important and will redefine relations between the government and the first nations. In my opinion, if this legislation is passed, the situation and development of the first nations will open major debates on the respect of individual rights versus collective rights within the first nations.

In closing, we are going to be faced with the extremely significant challenge of reconciling individual rights with collective rights within the first nations. At this stage this challenge seems very exciting and extremely important and I think that the first nations are ready for it.

I hope the government is ready as well. I would like this bill to be considered in committee quickly. I say quickly, but I mean with fresh eyes, with a view to the future and without constant reference to what was done in the past. Mistakes were made by both levels of government and by the first nations. Starting today, we have to look forward to see how we can make this important bill see the light of day. That is what we are going to do. I hope we have interesting debates in committee.

• (1630)

[English]

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague who sits on the committee with me, and of course, I would like to commend him for his activities on the committee. He is genuinely interested in improving the lives of aboriginal Canadians throughout Canada. I would also like to commend him for his appreciation of the importance of this repeal and the historical impact that it will have for the future of first nations in Canada.

I have a question for the member. Over the last 30 years we have seen attempts at repealing section 67 occur on three occasions and it has been to committee multiple times as well. Over the years it has seen a number of attempts and as such every time there is engagement with the various groups. Would he not agree that it is about time that we proceed?

Government Orders

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his question.

My answer is that it would indeed be important that we proceed.

I would like to tell the parliamentary secretary that getting study reports earlier would be better yet. The decision was handed down in 1999 and the report was tabled in 2000; it could be sent to us now. In 2002, there was another attempt to repeal section 67.

Very quickly, let me say that I would not want us to jump off the plane without a parachute. This is an important issue, and I would like the first nations people who will appear before us to be prepared for when this section is repealed. Do not come and tell us that we have to consider the possibility. The same for the government. The studies have been done. Where do we go from here?

• (1635)

Mr. Steven Blaney (Lévis—Bellechasse, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my colleague, the hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

He said this was an important bill because it brings about a change in mentality within Aboriginal communities, striking a new balance between individual rights and collective rights. He also said that this was an exciting and important challenge, and that he wanted the committee to consider it quickly. I share that desire.

Does the hon. member think that this bill could have a positive impact on community governance structures? If so, could it help enfranchise community members, and women and children in particular?

Mr. Marc Lemay: Mr. Speaker, I knew that my colleague for Lévis—Bellechasse was diligent at work and took many notes, but I did not realize that he took down my entire speech. I thank him for that.

My response is the following: yes, we are prepared. As a lawyer, I am able to read and interpret. Nonetheless, according to my interpretation of repealing section 67, this implies a change in the governance of the first nations and a change as far as respecting the individual rights of aboriginal peoples is concerned. Everyone needs to be ready. We need to be told why they are not ready to live with the repeal of this legislation. Those who are against passing this bill will have to explain why. Personally, I believe this is a major shift in attitudes. I think we are ready to take steps toward this change.

Mr. Pierre Paquette (Joliette, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate my colleague on his speech. This speech had a lot of content and addressed an extremely important situation.

I would like to confirm that I understood him correctly. In order to move forward in this matter, the stakeholders—the government or the aboriginal nations—need to know that we will move forward and that the terms and the framework that will allow us to move forward will be at the centre of the discussions. Did I understand correctly?

Mr. Marc Lemay: Mr. Speaker, I would give my hon. colleague from Joliette nearly 10 out of 10 for his summary. I agree with him entirely. That is exactly it. We will move forward.

I would now like to speak to those who form the current government and to those who think they will be in power shortly. No matter which party that may be, the government must absolutely move forward with this file. This means a considerable change in mentality. That is the same thing that will be asked within first nations governance. I think that is exactly what the government wants.

Personally, I have always believed that individual rights should take precedence over collective rights. In certain situations, a balance must be found and, since justice weighs issues in the balance, it will swing between collective rights and individual rights. We have the opportunity to try some ideas out in this debate, but we must not leap without a parachute. I say this out of respect. Indeed, we could cause immense damage.

• (1640)

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-44 today. The NDP will support the bill at second reading and refer it to committee. We do support the intent of the bill, but we do have some grave concerns around a number of aspects of the bill and that is specifically what I am going to be addressing this afternoon.

There are a number of issues that I will be talking about. I will be talking about lack of consultation, resources and process.

There have been many claims that there has been consultation over a number of years and yet, when it actually came to writing the content of the bill, there was no consultation on that particular part.

Part of what has been called consultation is consultation that went back to 1999, for example, in an overall review of the Canadian Human Rights Act and the old Bill C-7, the First Nations Governance Act. Those are some of the mechanisms that have been deemed as consultation.

I would argue that part of the problem that we have before the House right now is the fact that we have a government and previous governments as well that have not defined what consultation has meant. So we continue to bump up against this as a problem.

For first nations, Métis and Inuit people, whether it is this piece of legislation or other pieces of legislation that are developed, this directly impacts on their lives, on their ability to live in their communities, and in their ability to maintain a living. There was no consultation and sometimes the consultation is what I call lip service consultation. They will be called in and provide an opinion, and then the door is closed when the decision making is actually going to happen.

Consultation has been a problem that has been identified by the Auditor General. Supreme courts have ruled that there is a duty to consult, but the Auditor General has identified in one of her reports that there has been very little progress made on the part of the government in defining what consultation means. I would argue that if we are going to define what consultations means, we should actually include first nations, Métis and Inuit people as well.

Government Orders

In the discussion of the repeal of section 67 in Bill C-44 is the fact that every review of section 67 has called for an interpretive clause. Although there have been previous attempts to take a look at an interpretive clause, they have fallen short and actually failed.

In this case, I want to go back to the October 2005 report, "A Matter of Rights" by the Canadian Human Rights Commission which did call for the repeal of section 67 legislation. In the report it states:

—provisions to enable the development, in full consultation with First Nations, of an interpretive provision, which will take into consideration the special rights and interests of First Nations in order to guide the Commission and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal in the application of the Canadian Human Rights Act with regard to complaints against First Nations governments and related institutions.

There are two pieces in that. First, is the issue around full consultation which I have already talked about and the long foot dragging that has happened in defining consultation, but second, in the report it specifically called for an interpretive provision. This same report also called for a transitional period between 18 and 30 months to allow for that consultation and the enactment of the proposed interpretive provision.

The bill is dealing specifically with first nations on reserve. We have 633 reserves in Canada and part of the challenge when we are talking about consultation is how do we meaningfully include people. We have seen some of these challenges come up with matrimonial real property in how people are included from coast to coast in consultation.

How do we reach out to those rural and remote communities? How do we ensure there are sufficient resources to make sure that people who are different nations, who have different points of view and different cultural and traditional backgrounds, have a consultative mechanism that actually takes a look at those differences?

• (1645)

Further on in this report it talks about moving forward to repeal the legislation. New Democrats agree there is a need to do that, but many first nations women are concerned that moving too quickly will have unanticipated consequences, much like the aftereffects of Bill C-31. That bill reinstated a woman's status if she married a non-native person, but has had the unintended consequences of what some people are calling legislated extinction. Under subsection 6.1 (b) of that particular piece of legislation, there is a provision where people who marry non-native people end up losing their status. I want to say a little more about that.

I want to quote from a press release issued by Quebec Native Women Inc. It states:

If passed into law, Bill C-44 would change the ways in which decisions are made in Aboriginal communities. Human rights protection is an issue that deserves immediate attention, but a solution must be developed that takes into consideration the unique reality of Aboriginal people. Moreover, our customs and traditions must be taken into account, as well as our Aboriginal and treaty rights. "The creation of a structure that respects individual and collective rights of Aboriginal people should also originate from a process that reflects these same principles", stated QNW president, Ellen Gabriel.

Ellen Gabriel is a well respected woman from Quebec. She has expressed some other concerns about how this particular piece of

legislation can also be compared to the unintended consequences in Bill C-31. The press release went on to say:

The experience of Bill C-31 has shown us that well-intended legislation can have serious consequences for our people in the future. In addition, Aboriginal people can no longer accept the unilateral imposition of non-Aboriginal laws, which may be incompatible with our cultural values. Furthermore, research regarding the effects of the legislation should be undertaken before it is passed into law, not five years after when the problems created may be irreversible or are simply ignored. After all, we have understood for some time now the negative impact of Bill C-31, but nothing has been done about it.

It is really interesting to have a Conservative government introduce a piece of legislation that is talking about human rights. Yet, the Conservative government had an opportunity to support the United Nations declaration for indigenous rights. The Conservatives worked hard to ensure that Canadians were not supporting that, the Canadian government was not supporting that declaration. That has signalled to first nations, Métis and Inuit communities that this particular government is not taking human rights seriously in their communities.

Recently, Monday as a matter of fact, we had National Chief Phil Fontaine talk about filing a complaint at the Canadian Human Rights Commission regarding the appalling situation concerning child welfare in this country. Then my colleague from Timmins—James Bay today asked a question about Kachechewan, a community where the children do not even have access to a primary school. Surely schooling is a fundamental human right in this country.

There have been many opportunities for the government to demonstrate its commitment to human rights for first nations, Métis and Inuit people across this country and it has failed to do that. It is a bit hypocritical, I would suggest, to argue that the government's foremost piece of legislation will deal with human rights for first nations people in this country.

Mary Eberts from the Native Women's Association participated in the Department of Justice review on section 67 in the year 2000. She made a number of recommendations around section 67. I want to talk about a couple of those because people have put forward some proposed solutions for how we might deal with section 67. These are solutions that have come from first nations communities. Surely, those are the people who should be actively involved in putting forward those solutions. She said:

To protect traditional Aboriginal rights from the impact of a CHRA without section 67, include in the Act a provision similar to s. 25 of the Charter: the guarantee in this Act of certain rights shall not be construed so as to abrogate or derogate from any Aboriginal, treaty or other right that pertains to Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

She went on to say:

However, it should be recognized that some of Canada's most prominent foes of the rights of Aboriginal women have argued that the right to discriminate against and exclude women is part of the traditional heritage of Aboriginal people.

• (1650)

I might add that there are many people who do not agree with this opinion. This is not a universal point of view.

She states:

This argument is made, for example, by the Sawridge band in its case against Bill C-31, and in its intervention to oppose John Corbière's attack on s. 77 of the Indian Act. Accordingly, any provision drafted pursuant to recommendation 2 should include a safeguard, or rider, to the same effect as ss. 35(4) of the Constitution Act, 1982, that aboriginal and treaty rights are extended equally to men and women.

Government Orders

The [Canadian Human Rights Act] should apply to Band Councils, to their membership codes, and to the actions of the federal Government pursuant to the Indian Act. The Act should also include a standard provision that would make the [Canadian Human Rights Act] applicable to self-government agreements unless and until the measures to protect human rights were put in place pursuant to the agreement.

She also mentions:

—procedural rights, which could be enforced against procedural unfairness in dealing with claims for reinstatement under Bill C-31, and in the ways First Nations deal with reinstatement.

The [Canadian Human Rights Commission] needs to be provided with the funding to make it fully effective as an instrument of human rights enforcement. In the case of Aboriginal people, such funding would allow the Commission to take account of the facts that Aboriginal people live in isolated and remote areas; may not have access to sophisticated communications means; may have literacy and language issues in dealing with the Commission; do not have ready access to legal advice because of their isolation and poverty; live in small communities where reprisals for complaints may be a continuing problem or in urban centres where they may be homeless or transient; and are dealing with organizations...with a record of poor communication, so that access to required documentation may be difficult to obtain.

Ms. Eberts made a number of concrete recommendations that successive governments have failed to implement. The report was written back in 2000, I believe. I also have another section that I want to read for members, around the old Bill C-31, the old bill that reinstated women and has had this unintended consequence. She stated:

The shrinking of the status Indian community as a result of the application of the discriminatory provisions will enable the federal government to shed its responsibilities toward Aboriginal people, since it now recognizes obligations only to those who have status under the Indian Act. Bill C-31 also restricts the life choices of young Aboriginal people whose parents are C-31 reinstates: to ensure that their children can be registered, they will have to partner with a status Indian. Policies restricting access of Bill C-31 reinstates to their Bands or Band reserves may make it difficult to make such social connections; in any event, forcing them erects a kind of race segregation that resembles apartheid.

I am sure that nobody in this House wants to see unintended consequences from a piece of legislation that has not had that full consultation with first nations communities. The reason we support getting Bill C-44 to committee is that there must be that opportunity to hear from people who are going to be directly affected by the impact of this bill. It is essential that those voices are heard not only in examining this bill, but in identifying the resources required, in identifying the processes to make sure that we are hearing from people, and in identifying any potential amendments that might be necessary to make sure this bill reflects the needs of people in their communities.

I mentioned funding and resources. There are a couple of other things where we could talk about what might actually address some of the issues around human rights complaints. A number of first nations and reports have identified the fact that first nations are quite capable of developing human rights standards that could be equal to those of the Canadian Human Rights Act, if not better. The other issue is that there is a potential to have an ombudsperson who could work with communities that are identifying some human rights issues in their communities.

One of the things we know, of course, is that there is a financial cost to this, but I would argue that there is a financial cost of not doing it as well. We often do not examine those financial costs of not doing things. In this case, what we know is that if this bill goes ahead as it is, without any additional resources assigned to it, the Canadian

Human Rights Commission could face increasing backlogs around dealing with some of these issues.

• (1655)

However, we also know that many band councils are not equipped to deal with the volume of Canadian human rights complaints that could come in. They do not have the resources. They often do not have the capacity. Then there are the challenges with travel, communications strategies and all of those kinds of things. If this bill is to move forward, it is essential that resources are provided to communities.

Mary Eberts and others have actually called for an ombudsperson. This person should be able to interact with communities that often have different language capabilities and that have perhaps some educational awareness issues around what could be included in appropriate mechanisms to deal with section 67.

The Native Women's Association of Canada has also recommended that the Canadian Human Rights Commission establish staff and tribunal panels composed of aboriginal people who not only have a background in human rights but also have a background in traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. That would also make sense.

We are seeing in other fields that there is a call in the criminal justice system for some restorative justice processes. Under the Canadian Human Rights Act, it would seem reasonable that we have some sort of commission or tribunal that could work with communities around their own traditional methods of dealing with complaints.

The other issue that I do not think we have touched on is the fact that the Canadian Human Rights Commission should have a special monitoring function with respect to Canada's compliance with international human rights obligations. I know that unfortunately Canada has been cited on a number of different occasions around violations of human rights in this country, particularly women's rights.

We have seen things like the cuts to legal aid that have impacted on first nations women being able to access legal aid when they have a court case to deal with. There are other issues like that which would seem to make it important to give the Canadian Human Rights Commission the ability to oversee the implementation of Canada's international obligations.

I talked about the short transitional period. The Canadian Human Rights Commission, when it made its recommendations, and we would support it, said that there should be at least an 18 to 30 month period of transition to allow the consultation and the development of the interpretive clause, which would make sure we were meeting the needs of first nations communities.

There are a number of other things that I would like to address, but I know I will run out of time so I will close with a couple of specific points.

Government Orders

I mentioned earlier that this is an opportunity for the Government of Canada to fulfill other obligations around human rights. I want to touch again on the United Nations declaration for indigenous rights. This is a statement of principle that has become a flagship for first nations, Métis and Inuit peoples from coast to coast to coast. Canada could signal its absolute commitment to human rights by supporting that declaration. There will be another opportunity, because it will likely come up again over the next few months.

It would be a statement that would say to first nations, Métis and Inuit peoples across this country that Canada takes human rights seriously and is committed to human rights. If we want to demonstrate that we are prepared to work with first nations, Métis and Inuit peoples across this country on human rights, that we are prepared to engage in discussions on a nation to nation basis and talk about some of the situations on the reserves in this country, this would be one way to show that we are prepared to not only talk the talk but walk the walk. That in itself would go a long way to telling people in this country that Canada truly does have a commitment to human rights.

In conclusion, the NDP will support this bill going to committee for a fuller review, where we would look forward to the kinds of consultation that could have this bill reflect the needs in communities across this country.

• (1700)

Mr. Rod Bruinooge (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thought it interesting that the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan in her submission referenced walking the walk and talking the talk. Clearly this government is moving forward. We are walking that talk by bringing in this repeal of section 67. We are acting on behalf of human rights of first nation citizens.

I would also like to read something for her. A very interesting article in the *Globe and Mail* was written by Wendy Lockhart Lundberg, a Squamish Nation lady from British Columbia, the home province of the member for Nanaimo—Cowichan. She wrote:

Aboriginal women championed the introduction of Bill C-44, which would repeal the section of the Human Rights Act that shields from scrutiny the actions and decisions of band councils and elected chiefs. Bill C-44 would finally give aboriginal women an additional tool towards human-rights protections equal to the rights and protections currently available to all other Canadians.

I would like to ask the question: have aboriginal first nations women not waited long enough?

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, I would agree that first nations women coast to coast to coast in this country have waited long enough to ensure that their human rights are respected and honoured in this country.

However, first nations women in this country, the Native Women's Association of Canada in particular, have gone on record as saying that they want to see their involvement in any legislation that is going to directly impact on them. I think it is absolutely reasonable that we would include people in the discussion, in identifying the problem and the solutions, when we are going to develop legislation that is going to directly impact on them in their communities, not only on them but on their children and their spouses.

I would agree with and I said earlier that we support the intent of the bill, but what we want to see is full consultation. When we are talking about issues around human rights, I urge that we have full consultation around Bill C-44 and the declaration on indigenous rights. There are many other things that we need to actually bring to the forefront if we want to talk about human rights in a meaningful way and sound like we have any credibility about it.

[Translation]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I listened to my colleague very carefully and I thank her for her work in committee. I have a very specific question to ask and I know she will respond quickly.

Which does she feel is the priority? Protecting the rights of individuals or protecting collective rights with respect to the bill and the review we are about to begin in committee, if this bill passes second reading?

[English]

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate spending time with my colleague on the aboriginal affairs committee.

The question that has just been raised is part of the tension in this bill, that balancing of individual and collective rights. It is one of the important issues on which we need to have that consultation. When we are talking about different cultural traditions and different heritages, many first nations have a long history around respect for collective rights and respect for individual rights. Those are the kinds of issues for which the first nations of this country need to talk about what their nation's perspective is and how that balancing act between individual and collective rights needs to be examined.

We are so proud of our Canadian Human Rights Act and we need to talk about how those human rights are protected in respecting both the individual and the collective. I would encourage all members to take the opportunity to examine that very question at committee.

• (1705)

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Native Women's Association of Canada recommends that the Human Rights Commission establish staff and tribunal panels comprised of aboriginal people with a background not only in human rights but also in traditional dispute resolution methods. The persons appointed would come from and be approved by the national aboriginal organizations, including the Native Women's Association of Canada.

I believe this is critically important. Perhaps the member can explain why this is essential for the act to work well. Also, perhaps she can describe how this would also help women who live in big cities off reserve and how these kinds of traditional dispute resolution methods would be able to solve some of the complaints that may end up at the commission.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, I know the member has been a tireless advocate on women's rights. This bill is important in terms of ensuring that the mechanisms that are developed are culturally relevant, which has been a challenge.

Points of Order

Often times we develop solutions that do not respect first nations culture and traditions. We have treaty implementation right now in places like Yukon where people are working hard. The Teslin Tlingit are working toward having restorative justice mechanisms and a justice system that is respectful of the traditions. They know that it works.

In the cases of human rights violations, if we can institute some culturally relevant mechanisms we know it will help the community to solve its own problems. In addition, some of these communities do not speak English. In many northern Ontario communities, for example, many of the elders speak only Cree.

If we put together tribunals that respect the language and the tradition from those communities, I would argue that the solutions will be much more suitable to the people in those communities.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

BILL C-265—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons and Minister for Democratic Reform, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order with regard to Bill C-265. Without commenting on the merits of the private member's bill, I would appreciate your consideration on whether the bill requires a royal recommendation under Standing Order 79.

Bill C-265 would increase employment insurance benefits by lowering the threshold for eligibility for some claimants in changing the formula for the calculation of benefits. Both of these changes would result in significant new expenditures under the Employment Insurance Act.

Precedence clearly establishes that bills that create new government expenditures for employment insurance benefits require a royal recommendation.

Mr. Speaker, on December 8, 2004, you ruled, in the case of the 38th Parliament's bill, Bill C-278, which extended employment insurance benefits, that:

Inasmuch as section 54 of the Constitution, 1867, and Standing Order 79 prohibit the adoption of any bill appropriating public revenues without a royal recommendation, the same must apply to bills authorizing increased spending of public revenues. Bills mandating new or additional public spending must be seen as the equivalent of bills effecting an appropriation.

On November 6, 2006, you ruled, in the case of Bill C-269, extending employment insurance benefits, that:

Funds may only be appropriated by Parliament for purposes covered by a royal recommendation, as explicitly stated in Standing Order 79(1). New purposes must be accompanied by a new royal recommendation.

Again, on November 10, 2006, you ruled, in the case of Bill C-278, extending benefits, that:

...would require the expenditure of additional funds in a manner and for a purpose not currently authorized. Although contributions to the employment insurance program are indeed made by employers and employees, appropriations for the program are taken from the consolidated revenue fund and any increase in such spending would require a royal recommendation.

These precedents apply equally to Bill C-265, which should be accompanied by a royal recommendation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I completely disagree with my colleague who just said that royal recommendation is necessary for the employment insurance bill I introduced in the House of Commons. Employment insurance is not a tax; employment insurance is not an income tax; employment insurance is not a special tax levied by the government like the GST. It is paid for by workers and employers, it belongs directly to them and it should not be used to balance the budget and achieve zero deficits at the expense of people who have lost their jobs.

That is why I am asking the Speaker to study the issue and determine whether transferring the employment insurance fund to the consolidated revenue fund is just a way to take money away from workers without asking their permission.

This is not the same as income tax, GST or other taxes. These are contributions. Since the 1940s and 1950s, the government has been responsible for an insurance program for people who lose their jobs. Now they are saying that royal assent is required because this is money from the consolidated revenue fund. They want to pay down the debt with that money, they want to pay for all kinds of programs and they want to pay for all the programs the government wants to bring in, but they do not want to change employment insurance.

Mr. Speaker, I would like you to reconsider the government's arguments and the arguments I am making. I believe that royal recommendation is not necessary because this is not the government's money. This money belongs to workers and employers. This money should be invested directly in a specific employment insurance program so that people who lose their jobs can benefit.

● (1710)

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Szabo (Mississauga South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have had this debate on Bill C-278. I appreciate the argument by the member for Acadie—Bathurst but the recommendation of the Auditor General that all the premiums and benefits flow through the consolidated revenue fund does constitute government spending.

I concur with the arguments raised by the deputy House leader of the government that in this case as well a royal recommendation would be required.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, the Liberals and the Conservatives are the same party.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I thank all hon. members for their interventions on this matter.

[*Translation*]

The issue will be examined and the Speaker will render a decision as soon as possible.

*Points of Order**[English]***CANADIAN HUMAN RIGHTS ACT**

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-44, An Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour to speak in the House today. As this is the first day of my second year in office as a member of Parliament, I would like to thank the people of Kitchener—Conestoga for giving me the privilege of serving here in Ottawa on their behalf. I am continually humbled and honoured to be their servant.

I want to thank my wife, Betty, and my children, Gavin, Jenn, Benj, Shell, Arja-Lisa and Jamie. I also send a special thanks to my staff who work so diligently here in Ottawa and in my constituency office.

I would be remiss if I did not take this opportunity to congratulate my colleague, the parliamentary secretary, and his wife on the birth of their first child, Sarah. I think we all rejoice with them. As a father and a grandfather, I can tell them that they are in for some of the greatest joys that we can experience here on our earthly journey. I wish them all the best.

I would like to reflect as well on my work with the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. Under his direction, our government has made some huge strides in improving the lives of Canadians and especially aboriginal people all across Canada.

As it relates to Bill C-44, I encourage my hon. colleagues to join me in supporting the bill. The legislation before us today proposes to accomplish a very worthy goal, that is, to recognize and safeguard the basic human rights of all Canadians.

Mr. Speaker, I was remiss when I started. I will be splitting my time with the member for Kildonan—St. Paul.

Bill C-44 would amend the Canadian Human Rights Act so that individuals, namely, residents of first nations communities, will enjoy access to the same legal protections and mechanisms that are available to all other Canadians.

While other members of the House have already explained the specific advantages of Bill C-44, I would like to take a different tack.

As a stand-alone piece of legislation, Bill C-44 has considerable merit. However, to appreciate the true value of Bill C-44, we must take a much broader view of the issues which are facing aboriginal peoples, particularly first nations women. I am convinced that the repeal of section 67 proposed in Bill C-44 would foster long term improvements in the quality of life that are experienced by these women.

Research shows that the well-being of aboriginal people is substantially inferior to that of the general Canadian population. No other group in Canadian society is more marginalized. More important, the circumstances of aboriginal women are too often different from those of other Canadian women and from those of aboriginal men.

For example, according to the 2001 census, registered Indian women had an average annual income of \$8,766, which is \$1,356 less than their male counterparts and \$73,005 less than that of other Canadian women. In other words, aboriginal women earned almost half as much as non-aboriginal women and aboriginal women substantially lag behind non-aboriginal women on almost all socio-economic indicators.

More specifically, aboriginal women are more likely than non-aboriginal women to be impoverished, uneducated, have higher unemployment, be homeless, have higher rates of incarceration, be substantially more likely to head single parent families and more frequently to be victims of physical and sexual abuse.

Bill C-44 is an important first step toward addressing these issues. It would not change the situation overnight but we owe a duty to aboriginal people to start moving forward. The legislation is quite valuable as part of a larger strategy to support first nations communities in assuming greater control of and greater responsibility for their affairs.

It is in that light that I encourage my hon. colleagues to support Bill C-44.

As a Conservative, I believe that good government is small, non-intrusive government. However, I can appreciate the role that good governance structure plays in the exceptional quality of life that we all enjoy.

● (1715)

For example, for a number of years I had the privilege to serve my community as a trustee on the Waterloo County Board of Education. As the former chair of that board, I have witnessed first-hand how a number of accountable representative bodies collectively take responsibility for the quality of education within the public school system.

There are parent teacher councils, school boards and ministries of education, all of which enable taxpayers and parents to exert a significant level of control over what goes on in our public schools. Legislation has assigned each of these bodies particular powers and authorities.

In the off reserve communities various accountable bodies are responsible for many aspects of daily life, from drinking water and sewage treatment to land use and business licensing. Unfortunately, under the Indian Act these kinds of bodies do not exist on the on reserve first nations communities. Instead, we have a system of band councils, contribution agreements and a long list of programs.

As a result, no one has responsibility for specific issues, such as unsafe drinking water, inadequate housing or poor educational results for their students. With responsibility diffused in this way with no one accountable, there can be no recourse for individual residents of first nations communities. With no effective mechanisms to promote accountability, problems continue to fester. Consequently, to no one's surprise, vulnerable people and unfortunately, typically, women and children, suffer more than their share of consequences.

Points of Order

Canada's new government has begun to change this situation and to instill a sense of accountability into relations between Canada and first nations. Working closely with groups such as the Assembly of First Nations, Native Women's Association of Canada and the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, the government is determined to establish strong legislative frameworks that promote accountability in community governance.

Bill C-44 is an essential foundation for this reform, as are efforts to take action on first nations schools, drinking water and matrimonial real property.

Today we have the opportunity and the means to move forward. This legislation is a very important element of a wider approach that will see first nations exercise greater control over and assume more responsibility for the well-being of their own communities.

I encourage my hon. colleagues to vote in favour of Bill C-44.

• (1720)

Hon. Larry Bagnell (Yukon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like the member to envision a scene where there is a society, a village or whatever and there are no laws. All of a sudden some laws are brought in and people are told that tomorrow the laws will be promulgated and put in place. Imagine the chaos. There is no police, no courts to enforce the laws and no information to the people as to what the laws are. That is not unlike this situation.

What provisions are in place to fund the implementation of the bill? None have been mentioned in any of the speeches from government members. I think it will be difficult to implement the bill.

I think everyone is on side with the concept. However, the first nations governments will need to have the funds. People will have to be trained on how to deal with complaints. Then they will need people to deal with the complaints, they will need the bureaucracy to do that. The people who complain need to be trained on what their rights are. We see pamphlets from human rights institutions. There will need to be institutions to deal with these complaints.

Will the member encourage his government to provide the resources that would make it possible for this good initiative to work?

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Mr. Speaker, there is no question on this side of the House that it is time to move ahead. To envision a community without adequate laws and simply to superimpose something on them would be unfair.

However, it is clear that this issue has been under study for some time. Adequate consultations have gone on. The Commissioner of the Canadian Human Rights Commission has clearly indicate that he intends to work closely with our government in facilitating a smooth transition.

It is important for us to get the skeleton framework in place. Then the details of that will be worked out. First, we will study the bill in committee. I am also sure the government will have further initiatives in terms of the actual details of how that will all be implemented.

Mr. Gerald Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have listened to the debate this afternoon and for the life

of me, I do not understand where the Liberal members and the NDP members are coming from.

Since 1867, there has been inequality on reserve in Canada. For the first time we have a government that is willing to take action and give women on reserve property rights. I do not understand how we need to study this any more, how we need to look at this, how we have to somehow finance it. When we give people rights, they will take charge of their own lives. When they do not have rights, they cannot take charge of their own lives.

It was a Conservative government in 1957 that gave first nations the vote. Previous to that they did not have that, and I am sure at the time the Liberals said the same thing, that we needed to study this because they may not be ready to have the vote.

I suggest that first nations women are ready to have some rights and they are very long overdue.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Mr. Speaker, I could not agree more with my colleague on this. The whole purpose of the legislation is to give aboriginal people the same rights that other Canadians enjoy. He is right in the fact that we have spent far too long on this.

Section 67 was placed in the Human Rights Act specifically as a temporary measure. I do not know too many things that we would consider as being temporary for 30 years. It is time that we quit the talk and all the rhetoric and move on this file in the interests of protecting the individuals who are vulnerable in many of our first nations communities. Let us get it done.

• (1725)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc Lemay (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Mr. Speaker, my question for my colleague is this: does he sincerely believe that the first nations are now ready to move forward with such an important bill?

[*English*]

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Mr. Speaker, it is great to work with my colleague on the aboriginal affairs committee. I know he has a real interest in advancing the cause of aboriginal issues across the country.

To answer his question is, yes, I believe that aboriginal people are willing to move ahead with this at this point. They have been waiting as long as we have. We have heard from many of the aboriginal groups, indicating strong support for this initiative and the fact that it is time for us to begin to act on it rather than simply study and talk and study some more.

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to Bill C-44. I would like to recognize and congratulate the parliamentary secretary, as my former colleague did, on the birth of his beautiful new daughter and to also thank him for the wonderful work he has done on the bill.

Private Members' Business

I am pleased to speak to the bill this afternoon. It is a subject that has been bantered around and has been studied in the status of women committee, of which I am the vice-chair. Representatives from aboriginal communities, groups and women have appeared before the committee and have said that it is high time this happen. I am very pleased to talk about why we feel this is so necessary. I also ask for support from all members.

The legislation proposes to grant residents of first nations, including aboriginal women, the same remedies and protections available to other Canadians. Nowhere is the requirement for this protection better illustrated than through the issue of matrimonial real property.

On reserve, matrimonial real property, or MRP, provides a compelling glimpse of what life can be like for residents of first nations communities. MRP refers to the assets that a married couple typically share, the family home for instance. In the event of a family breakdown, provincial law prevents the sale of MRP until both spouses agree on how the proceeds will be divided. This effectively prevents one spouse from acting unilaterally. Provincial family law, however, does not apply on reserve. In fact, on reserve no law prevents a spouse from being evicted from his or her family home. I am sad to say that this tragedy is played out dozens of times each year in communities all across Canada.

To further complicate matters, under the Indian Act, only a band council has the right to issue an occupancy permit, a document that stipulates who may live in a house located on a reserve. As my hon. colleagues have pointed out, actions taken pursuant to the Indian Act are exempt from the Canadian Human Rights Act.

As a result of this legal quagmire, hundreds, if not thousands, of aboriginal women find themselves out on the street with nowhere to turn. Their rights may have been violated, their families may be in ruins, but the law can do nothing for them.

In 2005 the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development studied MRP and heard from dozens of witnesses. I will cite a small excerpt from the testimony of Beverley Jacobs, president of the Native Women's Association of Canada. Ms. Jacobs said:

—many first nations women have no recourse at all when their rights are being violated in their communities. They have no recourse to challenge their band councils for discriminating against them and for forcing them out of their own communities. We demand basic human rights for our women and children.

The legislation before us today is all about human rights. A report published last year by the United Nations Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights effectively chastized Canada for failing to adequately protect basic human rights. The committee's concluding remarks include this statement:

—the Committee urges the State party to repeal section 67 of the Canadian Human Rights Act, which prevents First Nations people from filing complaints of discrimination before a human rights commission or tribunal.

Today we have an opportunity to right these wrongs. The legislation is a crucial part of a larger strategy that will see first nations exercise greater control over and assume more responsibility for the well-being of their communities.

I urge my hon. colleagues to vote in favour of this very important bill. I congratulate the minister for putting it before Parliament.

● (1730)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. member for Kildonan—St. Paul will have five minutes left to finish her speech the next time the bill comes to the House.

It being 5:30 p.m. the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP) moved that Bill C-265, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act (qualification for and entitlement to benefits) be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, as always, it is an honour and a privilege to represent the people of Acadie—Bathurst in the House of Commons. It is also an honour to introduce Bill C-265. I would like to thank as well the member for Sault Ste. Marie—that good northern Ontario city, as he said earlier—for supporting my bill.

Let me say at the outset, that we got off to a bad start because about 15 minutes before the bill was read in the House of Commons, I saw that the Conservatives were already calling for royal recommendation. I could see that the Liberals were going to support that and back what the Conservatives were saying.

In short, they are saying that the workers' money, the employment insurance premiums paid by workers and companies, does not belong to them. Those monies were seized by the federal government when the Liberals were in power, and were put into the government coffers, in the general revenue fund. Now, the government says that it wants to pay down the debt and balance the budget at the expense of workers.

From the start I said that was not right. In the past I have used the following example. The amount of tax paid is shown on an individual's pay stub. Usually, the tax is used to pay for things that the country has to fund, such as the health system, roads, pensions and all that. In addition, there is the Canada pension fund. What is the pension fund used for? It provides a pension to individuals when they are older. That is why these monies are withheld from workers' pay. The other deduction is for employment insurance. That is used to pay people when they lose their jobs. It is money that belongs entirely to the workers and the government is responsible for managing the employment insurance fund and making it available to them.

It is thus regrettable and shameful that this evening, in this House, the Conservatives have asked the Speaker for a royal recommendation for this bill, arguing that this money belongs to the Conservative government and that it will be used to pay down the debt and achieve a zero deficit at the expense of workers.

Private Members' Business

But coming back to my bill, which is an important one, when we ask that the threshold for becoming a claimant be lowered to 360 hours, this is like taking the EI fund and putting it back in the hands of the workers who have lost their jobs, to whom this fund belongs.

In Canada, only 32% of women who contributed to the EI plan currently qualify for benefits. Only 37% of men who had employment qualify for employment insurance benefits even if they contributed to the plan. This means that the vast majority of women with seasonal jobs or part-time jobs 20 hours per week will not be eligible for employment insurance initially, if they are required to accumulate 910 hours of work.

That is how the government came to play with the figures and with the formula to rob them of their EI. That is how it was done, and that was done under the Liberal government.

Today, we have a Conservative government. I cannot wait to hear the government line. I am sure that it will say that 85% of Canadians who are eligible for employment insurance do qualify for benefits. But if they are eligible, every one of them, not 85%, should qualify.

We in the NDP say that the money should go back to those who contributed. For example, students who pay EI premiums and attend university will never see a cent in EI benefits. Women who work but do not accumulate 910 hours and young people starting off on the labour market will never be eligible for employment insurance.

This is why the 360 hour level requested in this bill would help put the EI account back in the hands of those to whom the money belongs, and these people could finally qualify.

The National Council of Welfare has just released its latest report.

● (1735)

It indicates that reduced accessibility to employment insurance benefits is a cause of poverty among the various age groups, including children. In 1990, 80% of unemployed workers qualified for employment insurance benefits, compared to only 37% today.

How can the government say that 85% of workers qualify for employment insurance, when there is a \$50 billion surplus in the employment insurance account? This is money that was taken by our governments, money that was taken from the country's poorest. Today, I would not want to find myself out of work. When a man or a woman loses his or her job, he or she goes back home and must tell the family that he or she will not be entitled to employment insurance benefits the next week. Imagine the impact on the family.

We are talking about poverty in Canada. The employment insurance program has generated poverty in this country. There are 800,000 Canadians who do not qualify for employment insurance. These are workers who lost their jobs. The Liberals and the Conservatives should be ashamed to have implemented such a system and to take workers' money. This is totally unacceptable and despicable.

I am also asking in the bill that we take the best 12 weeks, instead of the best 14 weeks. It is bad enough that workers only get 55% of their salary, up to a maximum salary of \$740. Now, even though workers are only getting 55% of their salary, the government still

feels it has not taken enough money from them. It will use 14 as a divisor, so that unemployed workers will barely get anything.

When the Conservatives were in opposition, they were interested in only one thing: lowering employment insurance premiums. There is not a single company in Canada that went belly up because of employment insurance premiums. However, I have seen families, women and children suffer because of the changes made to the employment insurance program.

This evening, I spoke to an employment insurance official. I am going to talk about a real case that I want the public to know about.

A woman in my riding decided to look after a senior who is over 80. The senior pays the woman \$30 an evening, or \$90 a week. The employment insurance service denied the woman employment insurance because this constitutes a work week. The woman stays 12 hours a night, because she spends the night at the senior's home. Her pay amounts to \$3 an hour. This violates New Brunswick's and Canada's minimum wage legislation, but that is fine.

However, it is inconceivable that this woman, who looks after a senior, should be denied employment insurance. The government claims that this is a full-time job. The woman is paid \$30 an evening for three days of work a week. Yet the Department of Human Resources claims she is not entitled to employment insurance. Do you think this is humane? The employment insurance system is in drastic need of reform.

When they were in opposition, the only thing the Conservatives did when recommendations were made was to call for lower premiums. Pity the poor companies. Their premiums are too high, they are going to starve, even though some are making billions of dollars.

In the nine and half years I have been a member of Parliament, I have never had a call from an employer in my riding complaining that its employment insurance premiums are too high. Never.

Where is our social conscience? Where is the wonderful country we like to boast about?

An employee does not decide one Friday not to come to work on Monday. What happens is that the employer has no more work for the employee. The employer asks the employee to stay home because of a lack of work. Why punish the employee? Why punish that person's family?

● (1740)

Why punish his or her children? In my riding, I receive cries from the heart from people who do not qualify for benefits because of the changes made to the plan in 1996. These are shameful changes, which are still in the statutes of Canada.

Private Members' Business

Yesterday, in the House of Commons, the Liberal leader said that the Conservative cuts were almost criminal. But these cuts were made by the Liberals, with the Conservatives' support, back in 1996. Earlier, when the Conservatives suggested that this bill would need a royal recommendation, the Liberal member rose and said that he was in agreement with that. That is what is making me say that there is no difference between the Liberals and the Conservatives. They are the same. It is shameful and monstrous to attack people who have lost their jobs and have been paying for a system that belongs to them, a system that they and their employers have paid into. Nowhere in Canada have I seen employers take to the streets because they were starving as a result of EI cuts or premium increases. I did, however, see families in that situation. I have seen thousands and thousands of them.

I want to commend two groups in Quebec: Mouvement Action Chômeage and the Coalition des sans-chemise. People walked from Montreal to Ottawa and took to the streets in support of the workers, to defend their cause. I want to commend them. They have once again stood up and sought justice from our Parliament, from our governments. What a shame.

Allow me to come back to the divisor based on the best 12 weeks. In the fisheries sector, fishers can work between 70 and 80 hours per week for the first few weeks but that does not continue throughout the fishing season.

I have something to say to those in Ontario and the west who do not understand. At the end of the season, when fishermen work only 20 hours, that is considered a week. This is where the problem lies. This is a basic problem. One must accept that, in the fishing business, fish and cod cannot be caught on Yonge Street in Toronto. We cannot fish for lobster on St. Catherine Street in Montreal. Fish and lobster are caught in the ocean, and there comes a time when there are no more and when the work weeks are shorter. That is why it is shameful to set the divisor at 14, when these people have only 55% of their salary. Thus, they are punished twice.

For example, the greatest gift that could be offered to my riding of Acadie—Bathurst would be investments to ensure that everyone there has jobs. They would be happy to work 12 months of the year. Instead of constructing enormous buildings here in Ottawa and providing all services from Ottawa, why not invest in the regions where the unemployment rate is high?

Peter Mancini, former NDP member from Cape Breton, proposed creating new jobs in regions with high unemployment in order to help these people find work. We do not want to move the jobs. People back home do not want to leave the riding of Acadie—Bathurst, they do not want to leave Caraquet, they do not want to leave Shippagan, they do not all want to go out west to work for the big oil companies that the Prime Minister favours by decreasing their taxes and cutting benefits for workers who lose their employment. It is shameful. It is monstrous, shameful and unacceptable.

That is why I am calling on this House, on behalf of workers in Canada and in Quebec, to support the bill, to decrease the number of hours so that women in our country will be equally entitled and there is no discrimination. Let us stop abusing the women in our country.

We can also help people by lowering the divisor from 14 to 12. This would have an impact on the amount of money they receive. Given the number of hours they work in a week, this equals 12 weeks. That is why a divisor of 12, not 14, would be right.

Mr. Speaker, with that I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about Bill C-265.

● (1745)

Once again, I am asking for the House of Commons to support the workers. In the meantime, keep in mind that this money does not belong to the Government of Canada. It belongs to those who contributed, namely the workers.

[*English*]

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Peterborough, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to address a number of items in the speech by the hon. NDP member.

He indicated that he has never heard an employer complain about the amount of money it costs for employment insurance. Quite frankly, I am surprised to hear that. Survey after survey from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business has indicated exactly that, that employers do feel burdened by the 140% contribution they have to make to employment insurance. It is a 1.4 to 1 ratio for employers.

There is a lot of talk about benefits and payments from employment insurance, but there are more ways to help people than with handouts. We want to create a vibrant, strong economy in Canada. We are going to do that by providing opportunity for people so they do not have to rely on supports like employment insurance.

Employment insurance is there to help people out when they need it, but they should not have to rely on it. We believe in providing good jobs. I would like to hear what the member has to say about that.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for giving me the opportunity to say that when they are asked if they would like not to pay taxes, they say yes, they do not want to pay taxes. When they are asked if they want not to pay employment insurance, they say yes, they do not want to pay employment insurance. Another question could be, "Do you want to raise the rate of pay for the employee?" They would probably say, "No, we would like to bring it down".

Employers have a responsibility when they hire someone that they pay employment insurance premiums collectively with the employee. At home they understand that. I did not talk about the rest of the country. I said at home in my riding, no one came to me or phoned me to say that they were paying too much in premiums.

Private Members' Business

In talking about job creation, the Conservatives cannot continue to refer to the past Liberal government. Even if the Conservatives still want to call themselves the new government, they should look at the fact that they have been in government for over a year now and they have not created any jobs in my riding. In my riding there is 20% unemployment. Every year the government is taking away \$85 million of benefits in employment insurance because of the seasonal work that we have in the fishery. You love our lobster, you love our fish and that comes from home.

• (1750)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): I do happen to like seafood, but I remind the hon. member that we refer to other colleagues by their riding name or title and not directly. We do address comments through the Chair.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I cannot stand to listen to someone talk about an insurance program as a handout. We paid into it. That is ours. That is the workers of this country. They were sold out by the Liberals in the mid-1990s when the Liberals changed it from unemployment insurance and called it EI, dressed it up as a nice looking horse, but it still was a pig in a poke as far as the workers of this country were concerned. Then they stole the money year in and year out from the workers of this country, the people who need it.

The end result of that was at the municipal level people went on welfare. What the Liberals were doing was a scam. It was a shell game. They moved off of income and put it on to property tax. They said that somehow they were cutting out the taxation of our country. That is typical of the Liberals.

To have the member stand in the House and say that employment insurance which people work for is a handout is insulting to the people of Canada.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, I cannot explain it better than what the member has just said, that it is insulting to the workers. I hope the workers will remember what the Conservative member just said. We have a problem today in northern Ontario where a sawmill is closing. Some mills closed in British Columbia. What is the government saying? If the company gives the workers severance pay, they are not allowed to have employment insurance.

In 1982 when I was negotiating collective agreements, it was the first collective agreement that was negotiated for severance pay to help workers to get a job and not have to be on employment insurance. The government has said that if they receive severance pay, they are not allowed EI. Then they have to take the severance pay to feed their family and they cannot look for a job. The government is stopping people. It is counterproductive what the government has done with employment insurance.

The way the government has made the formula for employment insurance, people might as well stay home and go on welfare. That is wrong.

This is totally wrong and should be looked at again. Anyone who looks at it will agree with me, if they are not just thinking of big corporations.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it never ceases to amaze me how dramatic the member who introduced this bill can be. He has to consider our position here. He went on about the Liberals and the Conservatives agreeing. What he has not realized is he is a member of the third party in the House and he probably will never be in the position to make this decision.

I am pleased to join this debate on behalf of the new government. Let me begin by saying that Canada's new government is committed to ensuring that the EI program continues to serve Canadians in an effective and timely manner. The government knows how important EI is to unemployed Canadians and we want to make sure the program continues to operate in a way that meets their needs in a prudent and responsible manner.

We are not only prudent, we are caring. That party, which claims to be everything to everyone, has forgotten that we do care, but we temper it and we balance it, and we balance it with prudence. That is why any proposals for a change to the program must be looked at in the context of the overall Canadian labour market, as well as be consistent with the fundamental objectives of the EI program, something that was missing from the member's speech. Most important, they need to be supported by evidence.

Bill C-265 is asking the government to amend the Employment Insurance Act in the following ways: to reduce the entrance level requirements for the employment insurance program benefits to a flat 360 hours; to eliminate the variable entrance requirement; and to introduce a new best 12 weeks approach for determining benefit rates. Those would be significant changes. The question is, are they the right changes for these times? To answer that question, let us look at the environment in which they are being proposed. Let us look first at the current state of the labour market.

Canada's labour market is strong. Canada's labour market is performing well. Some would say it is performing exceptionally well. According to Statistics Canada, the national unemployment rate, which currently is about 6.1%, is the lowest it has been in some three decades and the share of the population that is employed today is at near record levels. This is good news. It means more Canadians are working and the demand for labour is strong. It also means that the opportunities to find and keep work are many.

We also know that many sectors are experiencing labour market shortages and many are looking for more workers.

We also know that even in this strong labour market, many Canadians will go through transitions and will continue to look to the employment insurance program for support and the employment insurance program will continue to help Canadian workers.

Private Members' Business

Employment insurance provides financial support during periods of temporary unemployment. It can help balance work and life responsibilities. It can provide assistance as unemployed workers adjust to the market changes and seek help to re-enter the labour market. These are all important functions of the program. Anyone interested in how well the program is delivering on them can consult the latest monitoring and assessment report which is prepared by the Employment Insurance Commission.

The latest report, for example, analyzes the operations, the impacts and the effectiveness of the employment insurance program for 2005. It demonstrates that the program is clearly meeting its objectives. When it comes to access to employment insurance benefits, we know that over 83% of unemployed workers who had paid premiums into the program and who had recent job separation, who qualified, were eligible to receive benefits. In other words, despite the member's claims to the contrary, the evidence shows that access to the existing employment insurance program is actually quite high.

● (1755)

There are those who claim that the number of hours needed to qualify for EI benefits should be reduced because they say that too few unemployed persons receive employment insurance benefits in some parts of Canada. However, they are often quoting a statistic known as the B/U, or beneficiary to unemployment ratio. That is a misleading statistic. It is not an accurate indication of actual access to the EI program.

This is because the statistic includes those who have not contributed to the employment insurance program by paying premiums.

Mr. Yvon Godin: Don't smile, be serious. If you believe it, be serious.

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: I am trying to tell the member because he has been jiggling the figures. For example, individuals who have never worked, or those who are self-employed, have not paid into the program and are, therefore, not eligible to receive the benefits.

The B/U ratio also includes those who have paid EI premiums but are not eligible for benefits because they voluntarily quit, they were unemployed for two weeks or less, or they worked fewer than the required hours.

When we look at the access rates of those for whom the program is designed, we can see that the actual rate is quite high and again over 83%.

Nevertheless, the government recognizes that in regions where unemployment levels are high, it can sometimes be difficult to obtain enough work to meet the employment insurance qualification requirements. That is why the EI program includes a variable entrance requirement, something that the member did not allude to.

The variable entrance requirement is designed to provide for consistently high program access by making monthly adjustments to qualifying requirements that reflect the latest unemployment rates in each region across the country. Do members think the member understands that this is designed to provide for consistently high program access by making monthly adjustments to qualifying

requirements that affect the latest unemployment rates in each region across the country? This is where he is being served well by this employment insurance program.

When a regional unemployment rate increases, the entrance requirement is relaxed and the benefit duration is extended to allow more time for a successful job match. On the other hand, if a regional unemployment rate goes down, the entrance requirement is raised and the benefit duration shortened, thus recognizing the greater opportunities that are available for employment.

It is worth noting that to assist those with significant labour market attachment provides a significant benefit. For example, workers in high unemployment areas can get up to 37 weeks of benefit for about 12 weeks of work. All programs must have entrance requirements.

Bill C-265 proposes we abolish the variable entrance requirement and adopt a reduced flat 360 hour entrance requirement that would be the same for every region regardless of the unemployment rate.

There are a number of problems with this proposal. It would disproportionately benefit those living in regions with low unemployment over those in high unemployment regions. Reduced entrance requirements could create disincentives to work since workers may choose not to work beyond the minimum entrance requirements, and it would have only a very marginal impact on the number of additional people who would qualify for benefits.

The evidence indicates that the variable entrance requirement has played an important role in equalizing the percentage of individuals who meet employment insurance entrance requirements across various regions. Further, this measure could reduce labour force participation at a time when Canadians are facing growing labour shortages.

The new government is not in favour of eliminating the variable entrance requirement as the bill proposes. Evidence does not support abolishing it. This does not mean that the government is opposed to making improvements to employment insurance. I too have a soft spot for those who are unemployed—

Mr. Yvon Godin: How soft?

Mrs. Lynne Yelich: —and the government is also taking all things into consideration.

● (1800)

I remind the member that he does not have the corner on compassion in the House. I come from a community too that benefits from EI and good legislation. In fact, the government has taken action in a number of ways to address specific issues with respect to employment insurance.

We have taken action. We are expanding eligibility for compassionate care benefits so more family members can qualify for this. I am sorry I cannot continue on. I look forward to further debate on this issue in the future.

Private Members' Business

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this issue. I hold a great deal of respect for my colleague who sponsored this private member's bill and for his work on this file and on employment insurance in general. Our positions do not mirror one another, but we are very like-minded. Our ridings are quite similar in many regards.

Prior to the last election, his leader and deputy leader sat down and negotiated with our prime minister. They talked about amendments to the budget of \$4.5 billion. They were important amendments in housing and access to housing. They were investments in post-secondary education for students, very important programs, and they subsequently died.

However, through that whole negotiation process, there was not a word about EI from his leader and I felt bad for my colleague from Acadie—Bathurst. He has put so much time in on this file and I shared his pain when his leader disregarded.

I agree on the method the member has taken, through private members' business. Sometimes in the House we believe it is necessary to have a large scale, grandiose approach to fixing things. In this minority situation I do not think we have that luxury. Some working Canadians are hurting because of certain nuances in EI legislation. It would be great to do an overall revamp of the program, and many have talked about that, but to be practical, I do not think that opportunity exists, especially not in the minority situation.

There may be concerns on both sides, those of the workers and those of the employers. Everyone has their own perspective on this legislation. To come in with a perfect bill or a perfect slate of changes to fix the EI program will evade us currently, but we can do some small things. We can tweak it, adjust it and make it better. In essence, we want to serve the working people of our country.

Measures such as this one presented by the member for Acadie—Bathurst, through his private member's bill, may not be perfect, but if we wait for perfect, we miss a lot. A couple of the points in the bill deserve further study and have great merit. Therefore, I would like to see the bill go to committee.

My colleague and I worked together on an all party committee on EI reform two years ago. We saw a broad spectrum of presentations made by trade unionists, independent business people and chambers of commerce. Some very good recommendations came from that committee. A number of them were acted upon by the last government. Those changes have made a difference in the lives of many Canadians.

Look at the abolition of the divisor rule. At one time we would determine premiums by using the last 26 weeks over the last 52 weeks of work. That was changed to the best 14 weeks over the last 52 weeks of work. In talking with people who handle those EI files in my riding, that impacted on almost 39% of those receiving a benefit. That was significant. When people are looking at facing a long, cold winter what rate they receive makes a difference in many households, not just in my riding but across the country.

• (1805)

We took away some of the disincentives that were inherent in the legislation, some disincentives for part time work. We increased the

amount of part time work one was able to claim going forward while receiving benefits, thus increasing the trigger before they had to claim. We also looked at the number of hours for first year entrants. There were a number of pilot projects put forward that did have an impact.

Was it perfect? Absolutely not. The member talked earlier about the factoring of severance pay into EI and not being able to draw EI if one is owed severance pay. This is something that we sometimes talk about in theoretical or obscure terms, but I saw it up close and personal in my own riding with the closure of the coal mines by Devco in Cape Breton. Hundreds of miners received severance packages, but they were not able to draw unemployment insurance. They put in 23 or 24 years in a tough industry, paid into the EI fund for those years and were not able to reap any benefit from that plan.

That EI was just an opportunity so they could readjust their lives and go on. Many of those miners have gone on and have done tremendously well, but just that opportunity to draw from that program while they went through their transition would have been of great benefit. This was a recommendation that came out of the all party committee and I was really disappointed that it in fact had not been acted upon.

What I am saying to my colleague today is that if we can take it one battle at a time, although some people say we are doing this piecemeal, if we can win one battle at a time, they are little victories and they end up to the greater good, so I appreciate my colleague's comments.

In the past government, we were very committed to regional economic development. We wanted to grow the number of full time jobs in communities. The workers in rural Canada are not seasonal workers. They are workers who work in seasonal industries. Much of the economy of this great country is generated through those types of seasonal industries. We have talked about the fishery, harvesting our crops, mining our minerals, and forestry. All those jobs are very much seasonal.

I want to take a practical example. We tried to grow some full time jobs in a particular area. The specific area is Chéticamp on Cape Breton Island. A community group came forward with a fabulous plan to develop an infrastructure whereby we could bring in a private call centre industry. They refurbished an entire facility. A private company came in, ramped up and started with 25 jobs. As the business took off, the company saw an opportunity to grow that business again, and it went to 50 jobs.

Private Members' Business

Sometimes in rural Canada there are some things that factor in with full time employment. The company is now ready to go to 100 or 125 jobs in an area that has an unemployment rate of about 12.5%, but it is tough to get people because those people have to make a decision. Economically, they have to look at what it costs to get to work. With a 45 minute drive to and from work, working for \$10 an hour, perhaps with child care expenses and the complications that come with that, they have to sit down and look very hard at whether or not it makes sense to take that full time job.

Let us look at seasonal industries. In our forest industry, we have a small company that makes fabulous Christmas wreaths. It is not just the people at the plant who make the wreaths who are benefiting, but also the ones who provide the boughs, the raw resources and the transportation for the products. Everybody benefits. These communities grow through small seasonal businesses like this, so we have to be there to support them.

• (1810)

Let us not think that this is an Atlantic issue. There are as many people who draw benefits from EI in the city of Montreal as there are in all of Atlantic Canada. This is an issue that reaches straight across this country. I look forward to addressing it further at committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yves Lessard (Chambly—Borduas, BQ): Mr. Speaker, first I want to thank and congratulate the NDP member for Acadie—Bathurst, for his perseverance in defending the unemployed for so many years, often in rather difficult situations, as the member for Cape Breton—Canso pointed out earlier. The situation in which he was put when the next to last budget was presented made things even tougher for him. The member for Cape Breton—Canso himself had probably not noticed, but \$2.5 billion had been taken out of that budget. I think this was a deplorable misfortune about which the hon. member surely has regrets. It could even make him cry, but this is the past. Let us just say that such things should not happen again, because it does not help workers.

The bill before us is a positive measure that does two things. First, it reduces the number of hours required to qualify for employment insurance benefits to 360 hours, and bases benefits on the highest-paid 12 weeks. This means 12 weeks of 30 hours, thus making it easier for people to qualify.

As the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst rightly pointed out, over 60% of workers are excluded from the employment insurance program when they lose their job, even though they have contributed to that program throughout their working life.

The parliamentary secretary and member for Blackstrap wondered whether these were good changes in this day and age. I find that question to be disconcerting. There is no specific era to determine whether we should help those in need or those who are not in need. There is no specific era for making such a distinction. There is no specific era for determining whether the government has a responsibility towards the unemployed. I think the answer is obviously yes. This bill provides proper solutions to the problems faced by the unemployed.

Ever since the Liberal Party reformed the EI program, the government no longer considers it to be an assistance program. It is a

hidden tax that has particularly helped the Liberals achieve fiscal balance. However, the only ones contributing to the employment insurance account are the workers and the employers. As we are speaking, over \$50 billion has been diverted from that account.

This is nothing new. Since 1998—when the incumbent was a man—and up to the most recent report, released on November 23, 2004, the Auditor General has reported that the government continues to loot the employment insurance fund, thus violating the rules that were set by the government itself.

As for the Bloc Québécois, of course we will vote in favour of this bill. It is a bill that addresses concerns that we raised with other bills. My colleague for Cape Breton—Canso said earlier that it is just one part of the measures that should be implemented. It is positive and it must be implemented.

It also reflects the will of the parliamentarians who sat on the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, which made 28 recommendations. By mid-December, it had made 8 recommendations and added another 20 on February 15, 2005. The measures found in Bill C-265 are actually measures recommended by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

This same committee had recommended that the misappropriated amounts be restored to the employment insurance fund. Guess what? Last year, the Bloc Québécois tabled a bill calling for the establishment of an independent fund, as recommended by the committee.

• (1815)

During parliamentary committee meetings on Bill C-280, it was the Conservatives themselves who suggested the rate at which the fund should be reimbursed.

Now that they are in power, they no longer hold the same positions they did when they were in opposition, back when they supported the Bloc's demands on this issue.

Let us review, in brief, the history of these bills. Last year, in the previous session, the Bloc introduced a bill that included these measures. Bill C-269, introduced by a Bloc Québécois member, is now in second reading in committee. It, too, contains these measures.

On November 8, the House of Commons voted to debate Bill C-269 in second reading.

This bill was drafted in response to the demands of major unions and groups of people who are unemployed. It acknowledges the real needs of unemployed people. These groups made statements to the parliamentary committee.

Private Members' Business

I would like to speak in detail about the costs of these two measures. In December 2004, Malcolm Brown, an assistant deputy minister at the Department of Human Resources and Social Development, stated that the Bloc's proposed measure concerning the 360 hours—12 30-hour weeks—would cost \$390 million of a \$16 billion budget. It would improve employment insurance and enable 90,000 more unemployed people to collect employment insurance. Furthermore, the assistant deputy minister calculated that the measure in this bill concerning the 12 best weeks would cost \$320 billion. This measure alone would help 470,000 people in need. Those 470,000 would not have to collect social assistance from the provinces. Obviously, under the circumstances, they are currently exacerbating the fiscal imbalance.

Over the past 12 years in particular, the restrictions imposed by the Liberal Party on the employment insurance program have not only penalized people who lost their employment, but also the families of those people. They have also penalized the regions in terms of the regional economy. In your riding, Mr. Speaker, there is an annual shortfall of between \$30 million and \$40 million because the unemployed do not receive the EI benefits they are owed. It is scandalous. These people go on welfare, of course, which increases the burden on the provinces and Quebec, since they have to support these people.

In closing, the Bloc Québécois will support Bill C-265 in order to have it considered at second reading.

The Bloc Québécois sincerely hopes that the House of Commons passes this bill unanimously, or at least with a majority, refers it to second reading to deal with it quickly, receives it at third reading and that cabinet does not apply its royal recommendation to block this bill.

• (1820)

That would be the best thing that could happen for the unemployed. For once, the government—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): Resuming debate. The hon. member for Surrey North.

[*English*]

Ms. Penny Priddy (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-265 and to comment on the EI injustice in my community.

In the past, part time workers needed 910 hours to collect employment insurance. Under those circumstances, only 32% of women are eligible for employment insurance. In point of fact, only 37% of men are eligible for employment insurance. No matter what we do with the hours, the injustices in the EI system will continue as long as we continue to look at seasonal workers the way we do.

I represent Surrey and the lower Fraser Valley where about 8,000 to 10,000 farm workers are considered seasonal workers. They are primarily elders and almost 100% of them do not speak English. They depend entirely on the farm contractor or farmer to fill out their forms and then they sign them.

These people are trying to make a small amount of money to add to their family income. They are grandmothers and grandfathers living with their families. They are not used to being dependent upon

someone and they want to make their own contribution. These people work many hours a day beyond what is acceptable. When harvest is in, picking hours are long.

These farm workers sign the forms that the farmers give them but they do not know what they are signing. No one is in the fields to tell them in their own language their rights but they do know that if they do not sign the form they will not get paid and will not be able to go back to work. They, therefore, sign the form even though they do not know what they are signing.

These elders, who do not speak English, did not have someone explain their rights, were used by farmers and farm contractors and are now being sued by the government. They really work piecemeal. A farmer or farm contractor divides the piecemeal work by the number of hours and tells the worker to sign the form. The government is now saying that they tried to defraud the EI system but they did nothing of the kind. They had no idea what was going on. The workers who worked in 1997 are currently before the courts, which means there are another four years yet to go.

It has been suggested that it will take about \$6 million to try this case that will collect \$600,000 for the government. Is that economic efficiency to spend \$6 million to collect \$600,000? This money is not being collected from large corporations that are not paying the taxes they should. This money is being collected from 80 year old people who have moved to this country because they believe in justice. They are trying to do the right thing but because they are frightened by their employers they sign the form. They did not know it was wrong but the government is taking them to court. What on earth would they pay us back with? They barely have enough money for the clothes on their back.

As I have not worked in the fields I would not suggest that I know what it is like. However, I have talked to some of these elders through translators and they have told me what it is like to be in the fields with the sun or the rain beating down on them for 14 to 16 hours a day picking fruit. It is outrageous for someone to tell them that if they do not sign a form they will not get paid and they will not be allowed back to work.

I have been told about a similar circumstance in New Brunswick involving fish plant workers and a former Liberal MP who found a particular way to deal with those seasonal workers.

• (1825)

I am not saying that is the same situation. What I am saying is that we need a different kind of EI structure for seasonal workers, such as those working on the farms in the lower Fraser Valley from which many of us across the country receive our fruit, particularly blueberries and cranberries.

The other people involved in part time work are in security, in construction work and so on.

These farmers are just trying to do their best. They have come to this country to be with their children and make a contribution to the household. Therefore, for the bill to be fair, it needs to look at B.C.'s seasonal workers. The act has an overall inherent flaw in how EI is granted to farm workers.

• (1830)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Andrew Scheer): The hon. member for Surrey North will have four minutes left in her time for debate when the bill comes back before the House.

Private Members' Business

The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

[*Translation*]

It being 6:30 p.m., the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:30 p.m.)

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