



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

House of Commons Debates

VOLUME 146 • NUMBER 011 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Monday, June 20, 2011



Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday, June 20, 2011

The House met at 11 a.m.

Prayers

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

• (1105)

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—SENIORS' POVERTY

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of this House, ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible, and, therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the Guaranteed Income Supplement sufficiently to achieve that goal.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I would like to begin this morning's debate with a few illustrations of why this motion is so important.

We are talking about the people in our communities, seniors like Cliff Stafford from Oshawa who, after 50 years of hard work as a mechanic, has to rely on food banks to feed himself. That is wrong. He lost his wife nine years ago, he still has a mortgage to pay, and he is grappling with an illness. He watches every penny he spends, but the money just does not stretch far enough.

There is Tony from Vancouver who was a former real estate agent. After a divorce and two bouts with cancer, all of her RRSPs have been cashed in and she has no savings left. At 62, she cannot afford a place to live.

There is Frank, a senior in Sturgeon Falls, Ontario, whose bills for basic utilities have gone up by \$20 a month because of the government's HST. This may not seem like a lot of money, but it is when one is trying to make ends meet. It is cold up there and turning off the heat is not an option.

There is also Joey Jayne in Winnipeg who was forced into early retirement due to an injury at her workplace. She is now forced to use a food bank as her small pension and benefits are just not enough.

In Winnipeg, the number of seniors using food banks nearly doubled last year. Sadly, this is a trend right across the country. In Waterloo, one in four users of food banks are seniors.

The plight of seniors living in poverty is unnecessary and easily addressed with a targeted increase to the GIS. That is the reason why this motion is so very important. With a small investment, we can make a significant impact on the everyday lives of seniors. This is intelligent, practical and affordable. This targeted increase to the GIS would cost significantly less than the \$700 million that the government gave to the G20.

To give the House some perspective, the Senate of Canada costs Canadian taxpayers \$106 million a year. Since April 2006, the federal government has spent over \$125 million on hospitality expenses. The Government of Canada spent \$26 million in three months on advertising its economic action plan before the last election. In the 2009-10 fiscal year, the total federal advertising cost taxpayers \$136.3 million. From 2006-10, the government spent over \$6 million on Google word ads.

Perhaps the government would prefer not to make cuts to advertising or hospitality, but we could look to where the government is now losing revenue. Last year corporate tax cuts cost the government \$8 billion and \$6 billion this year. A tiny fraction of this amount would be enough to bring our seniors out of poverty.

The GIS, which is supposed to help seniors, actually forces many seniors, especially those who are single, into poverty. The amount of money they have to live on is not enough to make ends meet. If they try to earn more, their benefits are clawed back, which further condemns them to poverty. The motion before the House today would give those seniors enough money to bring them up to a reasonable standard of living without facing clawbacks of the benefits they depend on for quality of life.

The National Union of Public and General Employees outlines the critical problem with the small GIS increase in the most recent budget. NUPGE argues that the government's increase would provide only \$1.64 a day for single seniors and \$2.30 for couples. This amount would only go to those with less than \$2,000 in annual income, excluding moneys from OAS and GIS. Any income over \$2,000 and seniors would see their increase clawed back at the rate of 75%. It is shameful that we would expect anyone to try to scrape by on so little and then penalize them if they manage to make a little more money to buy food and other necessities.

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According to CARP, Ontario is home to 1.7 million people receiving OAS. Of that group, over 475,000 Ontarians receive GIS benefits.

Eligibility for GIS is based on a maximum income, other than OAS, of \$15,888 per year for an unattached person over 65 and \$20,976 for a married couple. Individuals living just above the income threshold are ineligible for GIS benefits. This is not a lot of money when one considers the cost of rent, prescription drugs, and all the other bills that have to be paid, particularly for unattached seniors. It is for those who do not have pension savings or an adequate income that this motion is designed to help.

The maximum benefits that one can receive from OAS and GIS combined is \$1,191. That is just over \$14,000 a year. This money will barely cover rent in most cities in this country and that is a travesty, especially since it is something that we can fix.

Canada is a rich and privileged country. We need to support our seniors because it is the ethical thing to do and practical in terms because our seniors support the economy and their families. We depend on seniors' volunteer work. We depend on their help with child care. We depend on them to participate in the economy. They can do none of this if they are struggling in poverty.

Today, we are talking about our parents and our grandparents, but our handling of their concerns will affect not just them but also our generation and that of our children.

Seniors represent one of the fastest growing populations in Canada today. The number of seniors in Canada is projected to increase from 4.2 million to 9.8 million between 2005 and 2036. With so many more seniors retiring in the years to come, we need to have a social safety net in place now to avoid dramatic increases in the rate of poverty in the future.

The concerns for the future are very real. Today, only 38.5% of Canadian workers have workplace pensions and nearly one-third have no retirement savings at all. More than 3.5 million Canadians are not saving enough in RRSPs for what used to be called their golden years, and 75% of workers are not even participating in a registered pension plan.

Clearly, the notion that retirement savings can be adequately accounted for through purchases of RRSPs does not work and urgent government action is needed.

It should further be noted that private retirement savings are concentrated in a small percentage of families. According to Statistics Canada, 25% of families hold 84% of these assets, while 3 out of 10 families have no private pensions at all.

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

But when income supports are inadequate, there are terrible consequences. One of my constituents, Ruth, lives with her daughter now because she cannot afford to live on her own. Ruth's daughter has lost time from work to care for her mother. But when Ruth's daughter attempted to claim a caregiver amount on taxes to assist

with lost wages, she was denied because Ruth's income was \$1,057 over the yearly maximum allowable, even though Ruth's income leaves her below the poverty line.

There is also Judy Howe and her husband from Halifax who struggle to get by. Their rent is nearly \$1,000 per month, leaving them with very little for food. In the public housing for seniors, where they live, they battle mice and rarely have access to hot water or heat.

Every senior in Canada has the absolute right to income security. In a series of polls conducted by the Canadian Labour Congress in 2004, 73% of Canadians polled said that they worried about not having enough income to live after retirement. The number of people who worried about income security had increased by almost 20% from two years before.

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

• (1110)

For instance, in London, Ontario, McCormick, which later became known as Beta Brands, a food processing firm which had been part of manufacturing in our community for more than 100 years, was purchased in 2007 by a Florida investment firm. The company laid off the entire workforce of 275 workers. It closed the plant and denied the workers their vacation pay, severance pay, and denied them their pensions.

Many of the workers at Beta Brands had been there for 35 to 40 years. Some were married couples. When the plant closed, many of these workers were utterly destitute. Despite having worked all their lives, the employees of Beta Brands face poverty and a loss of quality of life in their senior years. While this motion will not give them back their pensions, it will ease the pressure on their monthly bills.

In total, more than a quarter million seniors live below the poverty line. Since the mid-1990s, the income of seniors has reached a ceiling and the gap between the revenues of seniors and those of other Canadians is now increasing. According to the government's own national advisory council on aging, between 1997 and 2003 the mean income of senior households increased by \$4,100 while the average income of other Canadian households increased by \$9,000.

The situation is even more pronounced for seniors living alone. A life of poverty is most prevalent among women, those widowed, separated or divorced, recent immigrants, tenants, those without private pension coverage, and not surprisingly those with low wages.

Senior women face harsh realities upon retirement. The poverty rate for senior women is almost double the poverty rate for senior men. In particular, unattached women remain very vulnerable. They make up 60% of seniors living below the poverty line. In 2003, according to a Government of Canada report, 154,000 unattached senior women lived in poverty.

How do our mothers and grandmothers end up living in poverty? There are many reasons. Women's unpaid work makes their risk of poverty higher and results in less access to private pensions. Older women tend to have lower incomes because they live longer, which leaves them at greater risk of using up their savings as time goes by. Immigrant women are particularly vulnerable. Many over the age of 65, who have lived in Canada for 10 years or less, are without any income at all. Senior women receive smaller pension incomes because of the wage difference between men and women. Most divorced women do not claim a portion of their former spouses' pension even though they are entitled to it. Many retirement plans do not compensate for absences to raise children or look after sick relatives and we know that these absences are generally taken by women.

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

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

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

Senior women, whose spouses pass away, face a reduction in their partners' private pension and CPP, a deduction of 40%. This is problematic as some women may not be able to afford to maintain their standard of living. Expenses for a single person are about 70% of the living expenses for a couple. This has the potential to drive women into poverty as many senior women depend on their spouses' pension for the couple's income.

• (1115)

Our senior women need access to pension dollars, whether they work outside the home or in the home raising a family. Our mothers, our grandmothers, our fathers, our grandfathers, they all deserve the right to live in dignity, the right not to live in poverty.

Another of my constituents, Maria, is turning 65 next month and is currently on a provincial disability support plan. Maria learned that her CPP entitlement would be a meagre \$22.49 per month and that she would be eligible for OAS in the amount of \$286.89 per month. Maria receives assistance for incontinence and diabetic supplies through the provincial disability program, of about \$500 per month, but she will not be eligible for the extra medical expenses through OAS. She is worried about how she will manage when she is on the Canada pension plan and no longer entitled to this extra provincial help. Maria thought that her monthly income would decline by about \$1,500 with the extra medical assistance and that her income would be \$309.38 a month to live on. No one told her

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about the GIS top-up and, as a result, Maria was experiencing profound anxiety regarding her financial difficulties to come.

Maria came to my constituency office in great distress, having been told there was no other help for her. I am lucky to have a wonderful and compassionate staff who went to work for Maria. My office was able to quickly determine that she was eligible for the GIS top-up, equalling \$902.08 monthly. With GIS, OAS and CPP, she will receive \$1,191.85 monthly, but she will still fall well below the \$1,500 that she was receiving on disability. Maria is expected to manage on less than \$15,000 a year, which is well below the poverty line.

This motion will go a long way in helping Maria to make ends meet.

Another woman, a 63-year-old from Waterloo, spends the majority of her disability pension on rent. This leaves her with a mere \$48 per month to live on. She is on a six-year waiting list to get into affordable housing.

Our Party, the New Democrats, have been fighting for the rights of seniors for many years. When the GIS was first introduced as a bill in the House, New Democrats were there speaking in support to eliminate the poverty of our seniors. I would like to quote New Democrat Grace MacInnes, who spoke in this very chamber on December 5, 1966, on behalf of the poor and in support of the GIS. Grace said:

When I think of the elderly people of this country, those who have built this country, have hewn its forests and tilled its fields, have made its homes and raised its children, have worked its mines and fished its shores, those elderly men and women both in my riding and in ridings across the country who have nothing to depend on except their community for which they have worked so long and so hard, people who believed and had faith in the minister's statement that something much better would be in store for them, I am reminded of a verse which puts the situation much more eloquently than I could put it:

Two things, says Kant, fill me with awe,
The starry heavens and the moral law
And yet a third, more awful and obscure,
The long, long patience of the plundered poor.

I feel, Mr. Chairman, that the elderly people of this country have certainly had the long, long patience. But this government has permitted them to be plundered of their heritage and their birthright, which surely is to finish out their days in this country in comfort, with modern living standards and in security. I appeal to the minister to cut out playing with words and to amend the legislation so that we may once again go back to an across-the-board old age pension in this country as of right. I ask the minister to undertake a study to fix an income level which we can truly call a guaranteed income for the elderly people of this country.

Mr. Speaker, we have come a long way since those days in improving pensions, but there is much more to do. Grace's words are as true today as they were in 1966.

We in the New Democratic Party will never stop making proposals for seniors. We did in the past and we will continue in the future. We will, again and again, move motions to protect seniors, because they are our parents and grandparents, the builders of this nation.

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• (1120)

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Liberals have recommended a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy and, of course, campaigned on increasing the GIS, as well.

I wonder if the member could comment on the recent research showing that reducing income inequality in a society, in a country, actually benefits all members of that society from reduced crime levels, improved health and in terms of a number of other quality of life metrics.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, the member is quite right that there is a profound benefit for every single member of our community from reducing poverty among all members of our community.

We do, indeed, see increased costs to society in regard to health care. If people cannot afford a decent home, cannot put good food on the table and are constantly in stress, spending all of their days trying to figure out how they are going to manage, how they are going to raise their kids or, in the case of seniors, how they are going to meet those bills, prescription drug bills, rent, transportation, then their health is impacted.

A lot of seniors end up in emergency rooms. In fact 30% of the beds in emergency rooms are occupied by seniors in distress.

We have seen statistics that the cost of poverty in this country is about \$30 billion a year. That \$30 billion comes out of our economy because we do not have the wherewithal to look after the people in need, our seniors and our children, the people who depend on us.

• (1125)

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for London—Fanshawe for very ably outlining the dilemma and the dire circumstances actually facing many seniors in this country.

The member talked about the fact that in many of our cities and towns, seniors cannot afford rent. I know in my own riding that I have had seniors come to me and say that after living in their community for many years, they have had to move because they can no longer afford the rent in Duncan.

One of the things the member for London—Fanshawe touched on was the changing circumstances for many seniors. I know that in my riding and others we are seeing an increasing number of seniors raising their grandchildren. In Nanaimo—Cowichan, Joy and Carl are a couple of seniors who have had to take in their young grandchildren because of the changed life circumstances of their own children.

I wonder if the member could comment on the fact that not only have our seniors been working hard all their lives and hoping to retire with dignity and a comfortable existence, but now because of the economic times many of them are having to take in and raise their grandchildren. That is simply not something most of us would expect to do. I wonder if the member could comment on that.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, that is a very important question because it is a very serious reality.

In the province of Ontario, we hear more and more about seniors who are indeed raising grandchildren, because their own children are

without work, having experienced economic or marital difficulties of some kind. The end result is that these seniors are indeed looking after the next generation, but without any supports.

There are no provincial benefits. The federal government does not have any programs in place to support and help these seniors. We need affordable housing. We need universal child care. We need all kinds of systems in place to help people manage.

Unfortunately, the current government has seen fit to deny Canadians all of these important support systems. That puts everyone, including seniors, in jeopardy.

[*Translation*]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform the member that the Bloc Québécois will support her motion. I would be very surprised if any member in this House did not support this motion for seniors.

Does she believe that the government has its priorities right when, for example, the purchase of fighter jets will cost the government \$35 billion and a one-point GST cut means the government loses \$12 billion to \$13 billion?

If members of the Conservative government vote in favour of this motion today, does the member believe that the government will finally make poverty a priority and take action to bring seniors out of poverty, specifically by giving them easy access to the guaranteed income supplement to bring them above the poverty line, with \$110 per month, instead of the \$50 included in the budget?

[*English*]

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, it would not surprise anyone in the least to hear me say that the current government's priorities are askew. They have nothing to do with the reality of the people the government is supposed to serve.

If we look at budget 2011, which was just passed, less than half of what is needed to lift all seniors out of poverty was allocated in the budget. Yet as the member pointed out, \$35 billion was made available for fighter jets.

Here it is interesting to note that the government is quite prepared to support the aerospace industry in the United States but not in Canada. In addition, there are concerns that by the time the jets are delivered, they will be obsolete. They are designed for air-to-air combat, which is something Canada is not likely to do. There are suspicions that the jets are going to be used strictly on standby for the Americans, when they decide to bomb a country or take out their frustrations with regard to another country and launch a war.

We have seen tax cuts for profitable corporations to the tune of \$60 billion. That is \$60,000 million. If we can afford to give the fat-cat corporations this largesse, surely we can afford to raise our parents and grandparents out of poverty.

• (1130)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, in this important debate, I would be interested to know if the hon. member and her caucus have been considering the advantages of a nationwide guaranteed annual income or guaranteed livable income that would apply to all Canadians without a needs test.

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Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, that is a thoughtful question. Of course, a guaranteed annual income is something that has come up over the decades quite consistently with New Democrats and, I suspect, with others. When one considers the advantages of making sure there is adequate income, the advantages are profound.

I go back to the first question with regard to ensuring the health and welfare of members of our community. People simply cannot manage. They cannot raise kids, look for work, or be contributors to the society and economy that are depending on them if they are constantly worried about income.

As I pointed out, the cost of poverty in this country is reckoned to be about \$30 billion. We cannot afford that; we can only afford to look after people.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I want to ask my hon. colleague a question regarding an issue that is prevalent across rural parts of this country, certainly in my area, the utility bills that impoverished people, especially seniors, have to pay.

There is one charity organization in Toronto called Share the Warmth whose whole point is to produce electricity credits for those who are impoverished and vulnerable, because one of the last things that happens when their utilities are cut off is that they become officially homeless. A lot of seniors in my area fall victim to that simply because they have homes they have owned for many years and on which they pay no mortgages, but which are large, inefficient and very expensive to heat.

I was wondering if my hon. colleague could comment on that and how we can make certain strategic investments to help seniors with utilities.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, yes, the cost of utilities is driving seniors out of their homes and that is why New Democrats proposed removing the HST from the cost of heating and utilities. When they fall behind in paying their utilities, the cost to have their utilities reconnected is horrific and simply beyond their means.

In the last budget the government reintroduced the retrofit program, but only for one year. It is not enough. There has to be some intelligent long-term planning in terms of how we address the needs of our communities, and increasing the GIS would be among them.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the member for London—Fanshawe on her recent re-election to the House of Commons.

Since this is my first speech since the election and the start of the new Parliament, I will take a moment to thank a few people.

First, I thank the Prime Minister for appointing me as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour. I truly appreciate being entrusted with this responsibility. It will be a pleasure and a privilege to work with these ministers.

I thank my family for their ongoing love and support, especially during the election campaign, my father, Kit Leitch, my siblings,

Melanie and Michael, and our extended family who provided me with so much overwhelming support.

I also thank every person who worked on my campaign team, especially Ted Rowe, John Hethrington, Charlie Tatham, Sidney Stevenson, Ernie Purkis and Jacquie Noble. Their dedication and support will never be forgotten.

Last, but not least, I thank the people of Simcoe—Grey who put their trust in me to represent them in Ottawa.

The motion by the hon. member for London—Fanshawe calls on the government to take immediate action to increase the guaranteed income supplement, which is exactly what we have done and which is why we will be supporting this motion today.

• (1135)

[*Translation*]

In the Speech from the Throne, we announced that the low tax plan that our government is committed to implement will include:

[*English*]

A permanent increase in the guaranteed income supplement for some 680,000 of the most vulnerable seniors.

In budget 2011, we have clearly demonstrated that we are determined to contribute to the security of seniors who have worked all their lives to build a better Canada and to be able to retire with dignity. It should come as no surprise to members opposite as this Conservative government announced we would do this in the first budget 2011.

On the campaign trail, the Prime Minister said:

Although Canada has a strong system of support for retired seniors, there are still too many Canadian seniors who experience financial difficulties. A re-elected Conservative Government will ensure that we provide assistance to those seniors most in need, in recognition of the contributions they have made to our country.

That is a promise kept.

In the next phase of Canada's economic action plan, we will enhance the guaranteed income supplement for seniors who depend almost exclusively on old age security and the supplement. As of July 2011, eligible seniors will receive up to \$600 a year in extra benefits in the case of seniors living alone, or up to \$840 in the case of couples.

[*Translation*]

This increase will help the most vulnerable seniors, especially widows and single women with low incomes, to make ends meet.

*Business of Supply**[English]*

We are talking about the greatest increase in the GIS for the lowest income seniors in 25 years. That is not nothing. Let me also point out that, because of the measures we adopted soon after we took power in 2006, seniors and pensioners have now benefited from almost \$1 billion annually in increases in the GIS and will benefit from targeted tax relief of \$2.3 billion in 2011-12.

What are these tax breaks? First, we raised the age credit by \$1,000 in 2006 and by another \$1,000 in 2009. Second, we doubled the maximum amount of pension revenue that is eligible for a pension tax credit, which has gone up to \$2,000. Third, we have allowed pension splitting. Finally, we have raised the age limit for converting pensions and registered retirement savings plans from 69 to 71.

As a result of our tax relief measures, 85,000 seniors have been removed from the tax roles entirely. In 2011, a single senior will earn at least \$19,064 and a senior couple will earn at least \$38,128 before paying any federal income tax.

It is clear that an important dimension of economic well-being for the senior population is the income at their disposal relative to the working population. A good income security system contributes to maintaining the standard of living of seniors and minimizes the risk of poverty. This year almost \$70 billion will be paid out to Canadians through Canada's public pension system, which includes old age security and the Canadian pension plan.

The guaranteed income supplement, or GIS, is part of the old age security program. For this program alone, more than 1.6 million seniors received more than \$7.7 billion in 2009-10. This is in addition to the \$26.4 billion provided to 4.6 million OAS pensioners. It provides extra support to seniors with little or no income and has been instrumental in reducing poverty among seniors in Canada. That is why we have enhanced the GIS benefit by 7%, over and above the cost of living, since 2006.

The numbers speak for themselves. Canada has one of the lowest rates of senior poverty among the countries in the OECD. It is lower than that of Denmark, France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. We are proud that the rate of low income among seniors has steadily decreased from a high of 21.3% in 1980 to less than 6% today. Canadians can take pride in this notable achievement. We have also changed the rules so recipients can earn up to \$3,500 without affecting the benefit amounts.

Given that our economy is so fragile, in spite of the recovery, we must limit our spending while keeping tax levels low. In addition, given the aging population and other demographic challenges, there will be significant pressures placed on Canada's pension system in the coming years. We need to be fiscally responsible now to ensure support remains available for those poor most in need.

● (1140)

[Translation]

The \$300 million a year increase in the guaranteed income supplement allows us to focus our efforts on those seniors who need it most.

[English]

This is a balanced approach. It allows us to help the most vulnerable among us while fostering efforts to boost growth and create jobs.

However, what we have not heard from the opposition is a concrete plan. We see a general concept in this motion, which we will support and believe we have addressed this in the budget, but we do not see a strategy or a costed proposal. Depending on the measure of poverty that is referred to, the NDP may be talking about a \$2 billion a year increase in government costs. In an era of fiscal restraint, one is left wondering how we might fund such a program.

It raises a question as to whether we would be perpetually required to increase funding as we chase a relative measure such as the low income cutoff. Using LICO, which relies on an average, requires perfect equality for all income brackets to end poverty.

While we support this motion and we believe we have addressed this issue in the budget, we would like some clarification from the members across on what they are actually using to define poverty, because, as I noted earlier, Canada has one of the lowest instances of senior poverty in the world.

[Translation]

Everyone, including our government, is concerned about the financial security of our seniors.

[English]

However, to be effective, we need to target our interventions. It is in this spirit that we brought in the largest increase in the guaranteed income supplement for the lowest of income seniors in 25 years to help those seniors who need it the most.

For the most part, the majority of individuals who will receive the top up are women, women who may never have worked outside the home long enough to build a retirement pension in their own name or contribute significantly to the Canada pension plan, women who have had informal precarious jobs without any social benefits, and women who reach the age of retirement without sufficient private retirement pension benefits even though they have made a huge and valuable contribution to their family, their community and to our society.

We are proud of what we are doing to ensure the financial security of our seniors. Efforts over the past few years to reduce poverty among seniors have borne fruit and the statistics speak for themselves.

[Translation]

We are indebted to the previous generations who built this great country.

[English]

We owe it to our seniors to ensure they have a high quality of life and that they can retire in dignity.

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Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague on her maiden speech. It has been both interesting and fascinating to hear words and more words. All the gestures that we have heard from the government in the past are nothing more than gestures because it still has left a quarter of a million seniors in poverty.

If the member wants to know where the money will come from, I have a simple solution. If we look at the tax cuts that the government is giving, the largesse that I spoke of, we can easily find the money: \$60 billion in tax cuts to profitable corporations; and \$20 billion in terms of what has been given to the banks over the years.

All we are talking about is \$700 million. It is a lot of money but it is about the cost of a G8 photo op. We can afford it. We cannot afford to allow our seniors to be impoverished.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, again I ask about the NDP proposal and how it would lift seniors out of poverty. The NDP proposal is unrealistic. It would actually cost \$2 billion annually, not \$700 million as stated by the NDP. In our current fiscal environment this is not realistic.

The top up of the GIS of more than \$300 million annually is the largest increase for the lowest income seniors in a quarter century. This will reduce the depth of poverty for seniors living in poverty by over \$500 annually.

I would ask the member opposite to give us a specific costing plan so that we can understand how much this would cost Canadian taxpayers.

• (1145)

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, from my understanding, and I think I have this correct, the government will support the motion, which reads:

That, in the opinion of this House, ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible, and, therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the guaranteed income supplement sufficiently to achieve that goal.

If I am not mistaken, the vast majority of literature that exists on ending the two pillars of the OAS and the GIS calls for that increase to be in excess of \$700 million. What we are seeing here is a \$300 million investment by the government, which is actually less than half. I am not quite sure if the government can really support this unless something more is coming, which would be appreciated.

I am wondering if the parliamentary secretary could tell the House what she heard on the campaign. Is there more to come given the wording of this motion?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, the government is committed to the well-being of low income seniors and we have taken several steps.

The government has increased the GIS by more than \$1 billion per year over the last number of sessions. In 2006, we increased the GIS by \$18 per month for single seniors and \$29 per month for couples. In 2007, we increased it again by the same amount, an increase of approximately \$700 million annually. Now, in 2011, we have introduced a GIS top up for those most in need, and I emphasize that, of \$50 for single recipients and \$35 for each member of a couple. In

addition, we have increased GIS earnings exemptions from \$500 to \$3,500 before paying tax.

We have taken numerous other initiatives, whether that be income splitting for seniors on their pension incomes, or the tax free savings accounts. This government has moved forward on numerous other initiatives in order to support those people who built our country.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments made by the hon. parliamentary secretary. She talked a lot about how we would pay for this and what would be the plan.

As my colleague, the member for London—Fanshawe, explained, we put forward a very clear strategy on how to increase the GIS, and that is by spending \$700 million. As has been said, it is a lot of money, but it is clearly something that is within the government's capacity. That would lift all seniors now living in poverty out of poverty.

We also talked considerably in the election, and prior to the election, about strengthening and expanding the Canada pension plan. That would enable seniors and other Canadians to realize not only a pension that would provide them with some standard of living, but one that would be affordable. It was a phased in strategy that both employees and employers would be able to contribute to and that would be affordable.

My question for the hon. parliamentary secretary is this. We have provided a lot of solutions. Why does the government continue to choose to pour billions of dollars into the coffers of corporate executives rather than ensure that our seniors can eat and pay their rent?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, again, this government has done a significant amount for those seniors who have helped build our country. Whether it be pension income splitting, or an increase in the GIS or the increase in the exemption from \$500 to \$3,500, the government has shown that it supports seniors and especially low income seniors.

In addition to that, we would like to see the true costing of the NDP plan. What are the details for the \$700 million plan? We know that is unrealistic and could cost Canadians as much as \$2 billion annually. In our current fiscal environment this is truly not realistic.

The top-up for the GIS is more than \$300 million annually. It is the largest increase for our lowest income seniors in a quarter century. Will the members opposite support this?

Will the NDP please tell us the costing of its plan? We believe it is \$2 billion.

• (1150)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my colleague on the government side.

Business of Supply

In my riding, seniors who have a hard time making ends meet are asking me why the government is giving money to big corporations and to the heads of the major banks and oil companies. They are asking me why these companies are receiving tax credits when they are able to manage.

Could my colleague tell me why these people are getting preferential treatment over our seniors who are living in poverty?

[*English*]

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, as I have mentioned already, the government has been focused on supporting Canadian seniors, particularly low income seniors.

The additional GIS top-up is over \$300 million annually and will benefit over 680,000 of our lowest income seniors. It is the most significant increase in a quarter century. When combined with the 2006 and 2007 GIS increases, the government has provided over a billion dollars per year in annual benefits to GIS recipients over and above the regular index.

The GIS top-up was designed to target the lowest income seniors who are the most in need. This includes approximately 460,000 women, many of whom have made a valuable contribution to their families, their communities and Canadian society.

Targeted benefits to the lowest income seniors allow resources to be used effectively. In the current fiscal environment, we believe this is fiscally responsible.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to bring it back to real people, the seniors who need the money.

As I am sure all members have heard, seniors are not getting enough money to have a disposable income that enables them to buy the necessary drugs and medications, or to take their grandchildren out for a meal.

Does the member believe the government is giving enough for seniors to suffice over the next couple of years, or does she anticipate more will coming in the next year or two over and above what the government is currently committed to doing?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned before, these seniors have built our country.

In addition to the GIS top-up that we have talked about, this government has made significant investments in seniors: \$10 million to increase the funding to the new horizons seniors program; \$50 million as a targeted initiative for older workers; and a pooled registered pension plan is a commitment on which the provinces and territories have been working together.

This government is committed to seniors. We have shown that in the past and we have shown it in budget 2011.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I congratulate you on being elected to this new Parliament.

Today we are looking at an NDP motion from our colleague from London—Fanshawe, calling for an end to poverty among the seniors, something we have talked about for some time. The member says that the government should use the guaranteed income supplement to accomplish that goal.

However, seniors collecting the GIS are not the only seniors facing challenges. This is the problem with the NDP. Focusing just on the GIS is insufficient.

We need to start to look at the real issues of poverty, pension income replacement and quality of life for all seniors in a much more holistic way. Trying to pass off a one-size-fits-all solution is irresponsible, reckless and short-sighted.

As the critic for seniors, pensions and women's issues, I will vote for this motion. I would expect all of us in the House would and should vote for it, but it is very limited when it comes to its real scope.

The Liberal Party is prepared to work, as we have before, to support the goal of ending poverty. I hope it is a goal that all of us in the House will work toward.

In our most recent campaign, the Liberals made senior issues central to our platform. The Liberals were proposing, as was the NDP, to increase the GIS by \$700 million a year. If we truly want to eliminate all of those seniors who live below the poverty, there is only one way to do it, and that is by increasing the GIS by that amount of money.

Let us look at the corporate tax cuts. Simply eliminate one corporate tax cut of \$1 billion and there would be enough to do a bit more than that.

The Liberal plan would benefit all 1.6 million seniors who are living below the poverty line, not half of them now and half of them in the next budget. The lowest-income seniors would have had an extra benefit of \$650 a year.

I am not here just to poke holes in the NDP proposal. I am here to put forward constructive ideas, which is what I hope all of us will do in the House. The NDP plan is limited and overly simplistic, but the end result is very much worth supporting. Maybe we can all agree, following the debate today, on what the end goal will be.

The Conservative budget unveiled earlier this month includes a \$300 million bump to the GIS. That increase will be accessible to some 680,000 of the poorest seniors in Canada. Again, it is for only those who qualify, only those who are eligible, not all of those seniors living below the poverty line. In fact, what it is actually doing is giving those seniors enough for probably a cup or two of coffee a day.

This is what the Conservative plan does not do. It does not address the fact that women endure higher levels of poverty than men. It does not address the fact that 75% of Canadians do not have access to adequate pension savings, which is the core of the problem about which we are talking.

It does not address issues such as seniors' transportation or access to affordable medications. Nor does it address poverty faced by certain marginalized communities, such as rural, northern or Aboriginal Canadians.

What would I do differently if I had the opportunity to put something forward? Let me talk about some of the things I have done as the seniors critic in the last two years.

Business of Supply

Last October I released a comprehensive white paper, which examined the issue of pension reform in a holistic manner. It is available on my web site and I would be glad to share with anyone. I shared it with the government at the time I introduced it.

The paper contained 28 recommendations, covering everything from the cost of living increases and the establishment of a real poverty line to enhance the CPP and to make the Income Tax Act more senior-friendly.

I introduced the pension income bill of rights, which I have re-introduced in this Parliament. That bill would have given every person a chance to accumulate retirement income in a plan, which would be there in the long term for Canadians. It promoted good administration of retirement plans, to ensure that members of retirement income plans would regularly receive good, plain English information that they needed to understand their plan. However, to set out in law the goals to which we aspire legislatively as they relate to retirement income, a pension income bill of rights would protect pensions and protect pensioners.

Last week I put 15 motions on notice, aimed at dealing with seniors poverty in a real and substantive way. These motions build upon the ideas contained in that very same white paper.

● (1155)

One of those motions was to establish a national program for poverty prevention and independent living to provide support to Canadians over the age of 65 who had expressed a strong desire to remain in their homes regardless of advancing years or faltering health. Many of us, through the campaign, met seniors who were doing everything possible to remain in their home and were looking for assistance, whether that meant home care support, friendly visiting, or somebody checking in on them every couple of days to ensure they were well and had what they needed.

Another motion calls on the government to implement a national and voluntary supplementary Canada pension plan designed to provide enhanced retirement income savings opportunities and income support for Canadian seniors. This would allow people to contribute extra to a supplementary Canada pension plan and would help them save for their future. There is no vehicle for Canadians other than an RRSP. The current government is talking about a PRPP that would make banks and insurance companies rich, but would do little to help people save for their retirement.

Another motion calls on the government to launch an immediate review of the manner in which cost of living is calculated for the purposes of old age security pension, the guaranteed income supplement to the Canada pension plan and the Quebec pension plan.

Another motion is that the government should revise the existing Canada pension plan so as to remove any systemic inequities.

That talks about the failings of the current government and some of the things it could be doing. However, there are issues when it comes to the NDP motion and its failings.

Unfortunately, as much as I applaud today's motion, it is still nothing more than a long stream of motions put forward that fail to seriously address the problems. It is another list of sound bites, same

kind of rhetoric, but it does not talk about what we really need to do to move forward. It sounds good, but it misses the mark by reducing a complex national program to a sound bite.

I propose we remove the politics in favour of genuine problem solving. I know the member for London—Fanshawe is very much committed to finding solutions to poverty especially among seniors and throughout the country.

As to some of the failings of the Conservative government, two years ago the minister stated in the House at question period that pension reform had no place in Ottawa. He said that the matter was provincial. The government has reluctantly retracted that stand due to massive public pressure and now admits it does have a role when it comes to pensions. However, the government has still not put forward any real solution to the pension crisis that the country faces. We know that 75% of Canadians do not have a pension plan and do not have the opportunity to save.

The government talks about Bill C-3, which it has the courage to call, "Supporting Vulnerable Seniors and Strengthening Canada's Economy Act". For the \$300 million to go to poor seniors in Canada, the government calls it, "supporting vulnerable seniors". If it really wanted to take credit for that, it would have put \$1.6 billion in there and eliminated the poverty level.

That bill helps seniors by providing \$20 million to help the Canadian Youth Business Foundation. I am not quite sure how that would help seniors.

Also, Bill C-3 would help seniors by strengthening the government's oversight of the mortgage insurance industry. I am not sure how that helps seniors either.

As well, it would help seniors by reducing the in-study interest rate for part-time students to zero, bringing them in line with full-time students. How is that strengthening vulnerable seniors? I do not think it does.

Let us talk about the way ahead, the way we want to go, the way we would hope all of us would work toward to making a change. We need to change our national priorities.

In 2010 the government spent more than \$1 billion on things such as fake lakes, snacks, hand lotion and glow sticks at the G8 and G20 summits. That is more than \$1 billion and yet all it has for seniors living below the poverty line is \$300 million. There is clearly a problem. It does not have the same priorities that a lot of us have.

● (1200)

At the same time, the Canadian Association of Retired Persons tells us that 200,000 seniors still live in poverty. That same \$1 billion used for fake lakes, snacks and hand lotion could have been used for seniors. Increasing their income by \$5,000 would give them free groceries for a year. This must change.

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In the way ahead, the government says it wants to stop elder abuse. That is a very important issue and something we need to take a stronger stand on. However, on page 179 of the 2011-12 estimates, the government committed to slash the funding to non-profit organizations that are working to reduce the incidence of elder abuse and fraud. How can the minister stand and say he is going to reduce elder abuse and then turn around and cut the money that supposed to do that? It is the doublespeak that we continually hear. I could other words than “doublespeak”, but I will not in respect to the Speaker and the House.

That is right, despite the promises of help to prevent elder abuse, the government cut it by 44%. Elder abuse is a heinous crime that can and must be stopped. Again, it is all about priorities. Sound bites will not reduce poverty in our country, end elder abuse or alter the government's priority on pension security coverage inadequacy.

The white paper that I put forward in the Liberal plan is comprehensive, targeted and affordable. I would like to invite the government to start taking its responsibility for moral leadership more seriously.

We talked today about what the way ahead is and where we are going. It is the beginning of the 41st Parliament. I believe the issue of seniors for the first time in the last election, thanks clearly to the opposition and a variety of organizations, made it very clear that seniors have to be looked at seriously, treated with a level of respect and given the hand up that they need in so many ways.

I heard about housing throughout the campaign. Some people want to stay in their homes and want the support to be able to do it. For others it was a question of moving into apartments better suited to their needs, but there was nowhere to go. For the aging population, there is a need for more nursing homes. There is a whole segment of issues that need to be addressed in a much more mutual way, along with the provinces of this country.

The Liberal Party of Canada introduced old age security. The Liberal Party of Canada introduced the guaranteed income supplement. The Liberal Party of Canada also introduced the Canada pension plan and in the future hopefully will introduce the supplementary Canada pension plan. Clearly, Liberals have shown their commitment to not only ending poverty but ensuring that Canadians can retire with dignity and a quality of life. It is an objective of the Liberal Party and one that it will continue to fight for.

I am thankful for the opportunity to speak today. I again applaud my colleague from London—Fanshawe for bringing the issue forward today. I hope that together all of us in the House can move this issue forward and find a way on a national level to truly help our seniors, to ensure that they have the quality of life they very much yearn for and do not have to eat macaroni and cheese twice a week or be unable to fill prescriptions. We are very focused on the poorest of the poor at this particular time.

● (1205)

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would point out that it might be prudent for my hon. colleague to read the NDP platform from the last election because pensions and seniors were the focus of it. New Democrats spent a great deal of time analyzing the situation with seniors and proposed some very

important things, like better long-term care, home care, affordable housing and CPP reform. There needs to be CPP reform in the long term, but for now we need an immediate GIS increase because the reality is that a quarter of a million seniors live below the poverty line.

I would ask the member for her opinion on income splitting of pensions. One of the things the government ballyhoos is pension splitting. The problem is while it sounds very good on the surface, for seniors who are single, mostly women, income splitting is no solution at all. Once again, the government has come up with half measures like its paltry \$300 million, when what is needed is \$700 million, and income splitting that does not help seniors who are single.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, clearly, the government's focus is on the seniors who are doing very well. Income splitting helps a lot of people. So be it. Let that happen. Let that continue.

However, there are all those seniors who do not benefit from income splitting. Sometimes we think that in order to get one thing we have to give up on a whole lot of others things.

Given the fact that are \$6 billion in tax cuts in this current budget, why is it we have to take from the poor, frankly, to give to the rich? I would like to live in a country that cares about everybody. Because when people are strong and people have money in their pockets they can buy medication, they can eat properly, they can have a good quality of life. We do not have to take from one to give to the other.

When we talk about income splitting, there are other benefits to that, clearly, and I do not want to take it away from people. I think that we can redirect the money that was going into corporate tax cuts and fighter jets to the people of Canada and to ensure that people have the quality of life that we would like to see them have. They contributed and worked for many years and after all they have done, they should not have to be sitting on the edge worrying about how are they going to be able to buy their medications when they need them.

● (1210)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments made by my colleague. I know that she has consistently been very passionate about our seniors with regard to ensuring that they have economic means. In fact, it is one of the reasons why I had a petition with regard to the guaranteed annual income. It was a rather simple petition. It consisted of handwritten pages that one constituent brought forward to share with me in terms of going out and getting other people to sign it.

I wonder if my colleague could provide some sort of comment in terms of feedback from her constituents on the issue of not having enough money in order to meet their needs. I have found it fairly commonplace, especially over the last six or seven months, that seniors feel this an issue of utmost importance for them and feel the government is not doing enough.

To what degree is she hearing that at the doors, given that we just went through an election, in terms of it being a priority issue?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague from Winnipeg North on winning the election. I know he had a really tough battle. It was his second election. I was watching most carefully. He is an extremely competent man and I am very glad that he was re-elected. He certainly fights very hard for his riding as well for all Canadians. He is a real asset to us here in the Liberal Party.

In the last election, knocking on doors we have all heard seniors' issues rising to the top of the priority list. Finally after many years of a lot of talking, we now have an opportunity to show more action.

I recall sitting down and talking to two very frail people in their home. They had a bit of home care, a bit of Meals on Wheels, but it was such a struggle for them after they paid property taxes, hydro and so on to maintain their home. It was sad to listen to them. This is Canada. What do we do to increase their quality of life? It means there are many issues. It means a concentrated effort from a national perspective. Surely this is an issue that we all can focus on and move forward to eliminate poverty in Canada.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the position of the member opposite, who is the member lateral to me now on senior care. I really do appreciate her ideas that removing politics and looking for solutions is a great idea to move forward.

However, I did hear her mention sound bites not being the mechanism to solve the problem but did not miss a number of sound bites that were injected into her speech as she went on to criticize the plans of both the opposition and the government.

If her concern for seniors is so genuine, why in the past have the Liberals voted against pension income splitting, voted against increasing age credits, voted against raising GIS exemptions from \$500 to \$3,500 and voted against additional money for the new horizons program, including funding to raise awareness for financial abuse of seniors?

I would appreciate it if she could answer that and acknowledge that there are more plans than the Liberal plan that are beneficial.

Hon. Judy Sgro: Clearly, Mr. Speaker, it is because there is no plan. It is a piecemeal approach to a little bit here and a little bit there, whatever will satisfy the voters enough to get their votes and drag them into a process of believing they will get something they will not get.

When the member for London—Fanshawe and ourselves talk about a national plan, we are talking about a national plan, not a piecemeal plan.

As I said before, it was the Liberals who introduced the guaranteed income supplement. It was the Liberals who introduced the old age security and it was the Liberals who introduced the Canada pension plan. If it were not for the Liberals, we would not

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even have those plans. Thank God for the Liberals and that we have those plans, but much more is needed.

My comments today are, let us try to do that in a concentrated effort. We have four and a half years. We can work together with the government and put politics aside so that at the end of the day we could at least be proud of the work we would have accomplished on the issue of seniors.

The other point is that we would not be dealing with this issue if we had better vehicles to put money away. When women in particular stay home to take care of their children and raise their families, they do not have an opportunity, which is the reason we have so many women who are living in poverty. They took the time off to have children and they were not able to contribute into a plan, even if they had a few dollars.

• (1215)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I find it really interesting that the member mentioned it was her party that actually put pensions in place. I need to refer her to history, because retirement security has long been a priority for New Democrats. In fact, the first pension legislation in the country was moved forward by one of our party's forerunners, which was the Independent Labour Party, in 1927. It was passed due to the ILP holding the balance of power with the minority King government. I just wanted to indicate that.

The other thing I want to mention is that the Liberal Party members keep going on about what they have done and how they have put pensions at the forefront.

I ask the member, why is it that when the Liberals were in government, they had the largest surplus and they did not increase pensions for seniors?

Hon. Judy Sgro: Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the member not try to rewrite history. It was Liberal prime ministers who introduced all of those programs, and when we were in government, we clearly increased GIS every step of the way and every other program that we had.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by saying that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Beaches—East York.

I am pleased to rise today to deliver my first speech in the House. As many others have done, I would like to take the opportunity to offer my thanks to those who were so helpful to and supportive of me, including my family, of course. Some of my family members even campaigned for me outside my riding. They were behind me 100%. They believed in change and, this year, they did not give in to the feeling that their vote would not change much. The same party had represented Pierrefonds—Dollard for a very long time. This year, the people believed and rightly so, because this time, each vote made a difference in Pierrefonds—Dollard.

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I want to thank all of the community groups and organizations that I visited. Collège Gérald-Godin disproved the myth that youth are not involved in politics. I had lively discussions with people of all ages from the various cultural groups in the riding. I want to thank all those who had lively discussions with their friends and family about politics. Everyone in Quebec agrees that it was an exciting campaign. It is always nice to see people getting involved.

Finally, I would like to thank the people of Pierrefonds—Dollard for the trust they placed in me, in the hon. member for Toronto—Danforth and in the NDP team. I want to thank them for their trust, of course, but I also want to thank them for being a source of inspiration for me.

Thank you to Véro, a mother who is waiting for her youngest to be in grade two before she returns to work. In the meantime, as a single mother, she does an impressive and thorough job of budgeting. She is wondering if she should go back to school to try and get her high school diploma.

Thank you to André, the young 72-year-old man who runs a seniors' social group. He puts all his energy into that group. He told me, among other things, that he was happy to still be living in his own home and to be mobile enough to be active in his community. Although he tries to think about it as little as possible, he is afraid of the day when he will be very dependent on our health care system.

Thank you to Samina, who looks after her sick mother and who has been hoping for many years that a family member will be able to join her in Pierrefonds to help her support her family. Thank you to all those who shared their stories with me and told me about their concerns and their priorities. They will motivate me every day to come to this place and speak on their behalf.

People of Pierrefonds, Île-Bizard, Dollard-des-Ormeaux and Roxboro, you can rest assured that you will not be disappointed. I will work hard to carry out the mandate that you gave me on May 2, and I will be your voice here in Ottawa.

I will start today by asking the government to do more to get seniors out of poverty. This year, in February 2011, the government sat down with the National Seniors Council to listen to what seniors had to say about the issues that are most important to them. The government said it would be a good way to work with people from the community to find solutions to the concerns and needs of seniors. However, the measures announced in the budget are far from satisfactory. On the one hand, the government is putting on a good show to bolster its image and make it look as though it cares about our seniors; on the other hand, the proposed measures indicate that the government is not truly interested in putting forward tangible measures to improve the well-being of seniors. The National Seniors Council has reason to feel betrayed, manipulated and insulted.

The recommendations made by the National Seniors Council are clear. After consulting the public and conducting a number of studies, it decided to propose to the government five areas for action that could significantly help low-income seniors.

• (1220)

First, and I am citing the council here, it proposes to address the impact of the cost of living and—more specifically—the cost of energy and food, on low-income seniors; provide more accessible

and affordable housing; ensure that more seniors maintain their independence; and ensure that low-income seniors have all the necessary access to needed health services and supplies without a negative impact on their income.

In short, these areas touch on issues that are important to the NDP.

One thing we proposed throughout our campaign was to reduce the cost of heating. We advocated for home care and the building of multi-generational homes. We spoke about increasing accessible and affordable housing. These are the issues we are defending.

Unfortunately, not all the parties are defending these issues. The government plans to invest \$300 million to enhance seniors' income. Taken out of context—and I am thinking here of my friends Véro, André and Samina—this may certainly seem like a huge amount. The government is well aware of this fact and is taking advantage of it. The government is bragging about this measure as though it were a generous gift. However, appearances can be deceiving and what the government is promising is actually far from generous.

Let us look at this \$300 million from another perspective. Approximately one-third of seniors who are living in poverty would be eligible for this additional assistance. That means that two-thirds of people age 65 and over who are living in poverty would not receive any help. I do not know if you talked to people as I did during my campaign, but I often heard them asking how this assistance would change their everyday lives. I met with people who were disillusioned by politics because they thought that, no matter who they voted for, it would not have any effect on their actual problems and their everyday lives. By implementing this measure, the government is telling those people that they were right and that, if they are seniors living in poverty, they may in fact not see any change in their income.

There is another way of looking at this \$300 million. The maximum amount a person can receive—and we are talking here about seniors who are the hardest hit by poverty—is approximately \$70 a month, which is less than \$2 per day for seniors in the deepest poverty.

Is anyone reassured knowing that these seniors will have an extra \$2 a day? Personally, I am not. How can the government be proud of this measure? I have to wonder who among the Conservatives would be willing to go and visit any seniors living in poverty and tell them what they will be getting.

I once worked in a community-based organization that advocates to help people living in poverty improve their quality of life. So if anyone is brave enough to do such a thing today, they can come and see me and I will give them some telephone numbers. I can arrange meetings so they can tell these seniors what the government is going to do for them. I would not feel good telling them about all this.

According to the NDP's calculations, we need to invest about \$700 million a year to significantly reduce poverty among seniors. Once again, this amount might sound huge, but we must think of the millions of dollars given to the most profitable corporations and to banks. The government justifies its decision to limit spending by saying it wants to balance the budget, but let me remind the House that this would not involve any additional spending, but rather making different choices and investing money for people, where it can really make a difference.

Basically, what we are proposing here today would allow us to significantly reduce poverty among seniors.

I hope our proposal will resonate with everyone here today.

• (1225)

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I welcome my hon. colleague to the House of Commons. That was probably one of the finest speeches I have heard since I have been here. I want to congratulate her because it was very heartfelt. She certainly has politics in her grasp because she told us stories about how these policies affect people. That is how we debate in the House, at least that is the way I like to debate.

She also has a nice riding. I lived there in 1995 and I was able to vote in the Quebec referendum. I voted no, for the record.

My colleague brought up a good point about the utilities measures and heating costs. She also brought up home care, which is a major issue in my particular area much like hers when it comes to impoverished seniors.

Lately, we have been besieged with requests for help because of catastrophic drug coverage. There is very little in the way of drug coverage right now. Drug costs are much higher. Perhaps my colleague would like to tell us some stories involving her riding as to just how big health is, especially when it comes to catastrophic drug coverage.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his question.

In Pierrefonds—Dollard, we know what it is like to deal with shortcomings in health care. We do not have any major hospitals. We have many health care and social services centres instead and they all have incredibly long lineups. When the hon. member was talking about the high cost of drugs, I immediately thought of the mother who has to fight to get her medication after learning she has cancer while also fighting for her daughter who is involved in her community. One might think that the government would provide help in that situation, but people still have to fight to get the services and quality of life they are entitled to in a country like Canada.

[*English*]

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, organizations and volunteers in my riding of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour and other communities throughout Nova Scotia work to support seniors. They keep many of our seniors going day to day. For many seniors, dealing with the pressure and strain, and the demands as a result of living in poverty gets to be an incredible issue

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of capacity. Campbell's Cole Harbour Senior Citizen Club, for example, provides subsidized meals. The volunteers buy the food and provide a wholesome lunch for seniors.

Could my colleague expand a bit on her experience working with those organizations in her community that assist seniors?

• (1230)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for giving me the opportunity to draw on my experience in the field to talk about what is being done in the community for seniors.

Pierrefonds—Dollard has many seniors' organizations. There are organizations to help seniors, but there are also seniors who start up organizations themselves to create their own social networks in order to help each other out and to break out of isolation. People are taking charge of the situation themselves and if we give them the means, they can regain control of their own lives and improve society considerably. The volunteers are doing an incredible job, but they are exhausted. They cannot do all this alone. They need us. We are here for them. We just need to remember that.

[*English*]

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of the motion put forward by the member for London—Fanshawe and in admiration of her commitment to the plight of the approximately one-quarter of a million Canadian seniors living in poverty.

I rise to speak today out of respect for our country's seniors for the motion and the issue it addresses is most fundamentally that of respect. It is about recognizing that our good fortune as Canadians comes to us, not as a matter of chance or inevitability, but as a result of the work and the very many sacrifices of previous generations.

It is our parents and grandparents but mostly, it should be noted, our mothers and grandmothers who are the subject of this motion. We know intimately how hard they worked for what we today enjoy.

This motion proposes that we demonstrate our respect for the seniors of this country in a truly modest way, simply by ensuring that they do not live in poverty. That is all.

Yet, that is a lot because to be lifted out of poverty matters so much to those who live in it. It means enough food to eat, a decent place to live, the ability to pay for some basics and a retirement with a little less worry and perhaps even a little more pleasure. As much as anything, it means a little dignity at a time in life when dignity can be so easily lost and so difficult to recover.

That, one would think, is not much to ask of us, and it is not. The motion before us asks us to confirm that ending seniors' poverty in this country is fiscally feasible. It most certainly is. It is our good fortune that this moral imperative of ending seniors' poverty is also something easily done and easily affordable.

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The government budget calls for expenditures of more than \$280 billion for the upcoming year. This motion contemplates a tiny fraction of that, something in the range of about one-tenth of 1% of total expenditures. In fact, the expenditure required to lift seniors out of poverty is even just a fraction of the adjustment for risk that the government has built into its planning assumptions. Lifting all seniors out of poverty amounts to about 20% of the \$1.5 billion annual planning cushion in this budget.

Further, I would note that since this budget was first tabled in March of this year, the government has revised its deficit projection downward by \$4.3 billion in 2010-11 and revised it upward by \$2.7 billion in the subsequent year for a net deficit reduction of \$1.6 billion. All of which is to say that there are margins of error in this budgeting process, all of which highlight the fiscal modesty of this proposed initiative to lift seniors out of poverty and the fiscal feasibility of doing so.

Now it is not difficult to anticipate a response to this motion, and we have heard it already, that would suggest that this economy, owing to global economic uncertainty, is as of yet fragile, that there are threats to our economic recovery and that therefore we cannot assume that revenues will emerge to cover the cost implied by this motion.

However, the largest threat to both the pace and extent of economic recovery in Canada is the adoption of the kind of economics that informs the government's budget. It is of considerable curiosity that the government, in response to the recession, embraced, however tentatively, the need for fiscal stimulus, yet now, with our economic recovery so far from complete and under constant threat, as the government acknowledges throughout its budget document, the government embraces an economics of fiscal restraint. Service cuts and corresponding public sector job cuts are easily anticipated.

Although we hear members of this House trumpeting job creation numbers almost daily, this motion is a good context for reminding the House and all Canadians that we remain 300,000 jobs short of our pre-recession employment figures.

In the motion we have before us is the opportunity, not only to repay the critically important debt owed to the seniors of this country, but also the opportunity to assist in a very effective way with the economic recovery.

● (1235)

I would urge all those contemplating the fiscal feasibility of this motion to refer to the annex to the government's seventh report to Canadians on the economic action plan. That annex sets out the economic multipliers associated with various forms of fiscal stimulus. Interestingly, it identifies fiscal stimulus targeted at low-income households, such as seniors living in poverty, as having the highest economic multiplier. That is the greatest propensity for creating jobs of all the measures examined.

We, of course, do not need economists to tell us this. We know it is a matter of common sense that if we put money in the hands of people living in poverty it will be spent to ensure that basic needs are met. To reiterate, we are talking today about one-quarter of a million seniors in this country whose basic needs are not being met.

We have in this motion the opportunity to do the right thing by the seniors of this country while, at the same time, adding stimulus to the economy struggling to recover and creating jobs for a Canadian workforce struggling to find work.

We have many options open to us to support fiscally the implementation of this motion. At present, for example, the government seems set to continue with its schedule for corporate tax cuts, dropping the rate to 15% by 2012. These cuts will reduce revenue by billions in this fiscal year, with further revenue losses accumulating annually as we move forward. However, a recent study has demonstrated the impotence of corporate tax cuts in Canada as a means of stimulating domestic economic growth and job creation. The study shows that capital spending in Canada by large corporations has been in decline for about 25 years, irrespective of the drastic cuts to corporate tax rates over the same period of time.

Interestingly, even the annex to the economic action plan that I previously referenced shows the relatively tepid and delayed impacts of corporate tax cuts. The annex makes it clear that corporate tax cuts have but a fraction of the impact of fiscal stimulus measures such as the very one contemplated by the motion we are presently discussing. Moreover, the corporate tax cuts result effectively in the transfer of billions of dollars to the U.S. treasury as a result of the differential in the corporate tax rates of our two countries, billions of dollars that could be used to lift seniors and many more Canadians out of poverty.

However, if it does not please the government to lift seniors out of poverty by eliminating or even delaying its schedule of corporate tax cuts to large and, in many cases, immensely profitable corporations, I would point to the government's military procurement plans as another source for funding poverty relief for seniors in Canada. The Canada first defence strategy contemplates a total of \$490 billion of spending over the next 20 years on a wide variety of military infrastructure and hardware, including, of course, the F-35 fighter jets. According to the government's estimates, as controversial and contested as they may be, the 65 F-35 fighter jets that the government intends to purchase will cost taxpayers \$9 billion, at an estimated \$75 million to \$85 million apiece.

It is an incredible understatement to suggest that there is ample room here for lifting seniors out of poverty without compromising our national security. The issue here is clearly one of priorities and not of fiscal feasibility.

It seems to me that every good policy has a sound principle upon which it rests. The principle underlying the motion before us is obvious and compelling. It is about respecting what others have built for us and acknowledging our debt to them for the country we inherit from their efforts. This is not just something we can do. It is something we must do.

I urge, therefore, that the members of this House support this motion before them.

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• (1240)

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, they say that economists and the subject of economics are uninteresting but I would say that my colleague has shed some fascinating light on what the government claims is an unaffordable cost in terms of the \$700 million that it would take to lift all seniors out of poverty, and not just a few as the government plans.

I have a couple of questions for my colleague with regard to the budget and the outlook for the budget. It is interesting because it says that in 2009-10, individual personal income taxes will be about \$103 billion and that by 2015, they will be \$151 billion, a significant increase on individuals, on the hard-working people of this country.

However, in 2009-10 the amount for the corporate sector is about \$30 billion. By 2015, it will be up to about \$39 billion. If we take it as a proportion, it is very clear that the hard-working people of this country will be hard hit.

What would the member do in terms of this tax system and where would he find the money for seniors?

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, there are many places to find money to support and show our respect for the seniors of this country who are living in poverty.

The one thing we must do is deal with the issue of corporate tax cuts. I find it very interesting that a government that has authored this budget and prides itself on fiscal responsibility has lowered the corporate tax rates with the aid of the Liberal Party of Canada to such an extent that we have effectively a \$6 billion tax transfer to the U.S. treasury every year. The foregone revenue to this country from those corporate tax cuts could very easily go to support seniors and lift many others who live in poverty out of poverty, including children.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, everybody in this House will have seniors living in their ridings. In my own riding, housing is not as affordable as it is in some other parts of the country. In the previous sitting in the House, the member from Vancouver East had a bill before this House on a national affordable housing strategy which would have directly assisted seniors.

In my own riding, it is very difficult to get home support care, which we know helps seniors to stay in their homes.

Could the member comment on what he sees as being an important aspect of contributing toward seniors being able to age in their own homes, having access to affordable homes and maintaining their health and well-being as a result of adequate housing?

• (1245)

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, it is most certainly clear that this country needs a national affordable housing strategy. As many members of this House will know, Beaches—East York is in the city of Toronto, which is a very expensive city in which to live. Many seniors in the city of Toronto are now living in poverty and having tremendous difficulty affording the homes and apartments in which they live.

One of the trends that we see in our city is seniors having to move out of their homes and communities that are easily accessible to

many of the services they require simply because the cost of housing in those areas has become so expensive. In the city of Toronto and across the country, it is a matter of many seniors being forced to live in communities away from the services they need, which adds to their economic social isolation as well.

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite from Beaches—East York speaks to seniors being lifted out poverty—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. I thought the member was rising on debate. Is he rising on a question?

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Speaker, I was rising in response to the member opposite.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The questions and answers for the member from Beaches—East York is completed now. We are moving on to the next speaker who is the hon. member for Huron—Bruce.

Mr. Ben Lobb (Huron—Bruce, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in the House today to speak to the motion by the member for London—Fanshawe, who likely does not know that my grandmother of 85 years is actually a constituent of hers. I do not suppose she voted for the member, but I thought I would add that as a bit of feedback.

This is an important issue. The riding of Huron—Bruce, as many people know, is in southwestern Ontario and home to a great number of seniors. It has a beautiful shoreline north and south of Lake Huron, just north of Grand Bend and Southampton. It is home to a great number of seniors who have worked hard through their years and now enjoy retirement in a beautiful area that includes both Huron and Bruce counties.

In looking at what the government has done for seniors, I can think of one program right off the bat that has helped a lot of seniors, the new horizons program. This program involves a great number of seniors in our communities, whether in health programs that get them physically active or one, for example, that makes a building in the community more accessible. The new horizons program is very welcome and has had a significant impact in the riding of Huron—Bruce and, of course, all the others throughout this country.

Another great program this government has worked on at length, and specifically in this case with the Province of Ontario and counties or municipalities, is affordable housing. This is a great equalizer for seniors. Here, I can think of an affordable housing project that was approved, in conjunction with the province, for the riding of Huron—Bruce in the municipality of Huron East. It is a great program for affordable housing for seniors.

Yes, on one side, it is important that at-risk seniors have a safe and bankable Canada pension, old age security and, if they qualify, the supplement to top up their incomes. On the other side, too, on the expense side, it is also vitally important to have safe and affordable housing for seniors.

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I know our government has worked hard with all provinces to have affordable housing projects in place. It may surprise those watching today, and even some of the members opposite, that a lot of the dollars allocated in previous budgets for new affordable housing projects or for refurbishing existing ones were voted against by the opposition. We hoped they would support those projects, but in fact they voted against them. They also voted against the dollars for the new horizons for seniors program. That was also unfortunate, but be that as it may, it happened.

When we look at our initiatives for affordable housing, our government has been there for seniors, and if we look at the new dollars in this budget for the guaranteed income supplement, certainly the \$300 million is welcome. The opposition had an opportunity in March to make a statement to at-risk seniors saying whether it wanted \$300 million more allocated to seniors for the guaranteed income supplement or to spend that money on an election. The opposition, oddly enough, voted for an election and now is back at the table asking for more money. It is a little passing strange that this is the way it thinks, but we are getting used to it. I am nearly in my third year here and am certainly getting used to these initiatives.

• (1250)

I think back to when I first arrived here in October 2008. In 2009, when the committees were struck, I had the great opportunity and privilege to sit on the human resources committee, which was in the midst of a study on poverty in Canada. It was an important study of a committee that travelled from coast to coast, looking at all forms of poverty and low-income situations, how they arose and in what communities programs were working well, as well as a road map to lift all seniors and Canadians out of poverty.

While I was thinking of what to say today, I realized that every single opposition member of that committee did not get re-elected. Be that as it may, it is a fact. It could be looked at as a referendum on what Canadians thought we were doing for those at risk in providing needed funding. Whether for social transfers, health transfers, or working agreements with provinces for affordable housing, our government was there.

If one thinks of other measures to help those most at risk improve and make their lives more meaningful, one can look to social transfers and health transfers. This government has consistently increased dollars to provinces for health care at 6% a year since 2006, and the same for social transfers. These are great investments that help those most at risk by equalizing things.

The ironic thing for those listening at home is that they we will start to see a trend. The opposition voted against this. The opposition sitting in the House right here today voted against each and every dollar allocated for this.

The government and the Conservative Party of Canada are certainly here for all Canadians. We are here for those who find themselves in low-income situations. We are here for those who find themselves in what would be defined as poverty. We will continue to be there for them.

Another thought of mine in this discussion is that the issue is not where one is at in one's retirement years, as far as low-income or

poverty is concerned, but perhaps the 40 years leading to it. What we have done as government, what we have done in our methodology, is to try to help Canadians steer clear of poverty.

The government, initially through Status of Women Canada and later through Human Resources, funded a program to identify at-risk youth in my riding through the organization Rural Response for Healthy Children. These at-risk youth, including those who had had a child at an early age or young families who were having financial issues, were helped through Rural Response for Healthy Children to learn basic budgeting 101. This was a tremendously popular program in the Huron portion of Huron—Bruce, and it spread.

Once other counties heard about this program, they wanted it. With funding through Status of Women, the rural response organization did programs in Perth, Middlesex and Bruce counties. There were about half a dozen counties in which did a train the trainer program so they could deliver this information to the most at-risk youth, who perhaps did not even know how to write a cheque or open a bank account. They informed them of the most basic things, including setting up a budget for a household to ensure that the youth could live within their means.

• (1255)

So, yes, we have programs providing dollars for those in their senior years, but we are also taking proactive measures to help people have a little more.

I have a quote from a young lady, who is symbolic of those we are trying to reach. She said:

When I came into this session I was scared. My husband took care of the finances and never told me what was happening. We were always getting calls from creditors and we stopped answering the phone. I never had enough money to buy food, formula and diapers. I was pregnant again and didn't know what was going on or how we were going to survive. Then I took this training and I started asking questions about our money and where it was going. At first he was mad about it and then I explained that I had taken this training and what I learned. Then he wanted to find out what it was and came to some sessions with me. Now we work together on our household budget and we can finally say we don't owe anyone any money now. After two years we can pay all of our bills on time, we are better partners, more loving and kind to each other, better parents and two months ago we started a savings account. It may be only \$10.00 a month but to us it is the world. Thank you so much for offering this training to me and my family and for supporting us along the way. Things will never be as bad as they were and we have RRHC to thank for it.

That is a good news story. That is being proactive. That is working with those who are at risk and setting them up for a great future. Yes, it is only \$10 a month, but it will be \$50 a month and then it will be \$100 a month and things will grow. That was a program through Status of Women. We were fortunate enough as well to have a program through Human Resources, and we called it budgeting 2.0 or 102. This is a program to help people manage their finances, whether they have a dollar or a million dollars.

One of the main techniques was to get these young families to start thinking about their children's education and, although it may be 15 or 20 years down the road, to learn about registered education savings programs, to learn about the programs available to families to continue to build their savings.

These are some of the initiatives that I give our government great credit for, initiatives that oftentimes we do not see in the news and do not hear about. These investments are not in the hundreds of millions. This investment with these two programs was likely \$200,000 over three years.

The point is that there is not one silver bullet for solving our issues of poverty among seniors and young families, but it is about a whole array of programs and partnerships to lift all those who are poor.

There are some impressive facts about Canada. Among the developed world, the developed nations, we have the lowest rate of poverty among seniors. That is something to be proud of. Of course, we would love to have zero poverty among seniors, to have no poverty among them at all, but we have not got there yet. We as a government are working hard. Sometimes we are working hard in spite of what the opposition members do with their votes, but we are committed to this.

We have also had other programs in the last number of budgets. We had the targeted initiative for older workers. This has been a tremendous program. There is even a work-sharing program. I see in my community, in my riding of Huron—Bruce, a number of small manufacturers with older workforces that have used work-sharing. This has allowed our older workers to stay employed and employable, and as we are coming through the recession, this has allowed them to maintain their jobs as they approach 60 or 65, or even beyond, if they choose to work into their further years.

● (1300)

Our government should be commended for the work it has done. I think back to the study we did on the human resources committee and the testimonials we heard from a great number of delegates. Our goal as a government is to lift all seniors out of poverty.

It is also important that we continue to grow our economy, so we can continue to support increased transfers for health care, so we can continue to provide the transfer payments to provinces so that they can provide the necessary social programs.

I can think of another great program that is just starting in our community. It provides dental care to young people whose parents are low income, so they can have a healthy lifestyle. All of us know that good dental hygiene leads to good health.

The federal government has introduced a great number of programs. There is a trickle down effect to our counties and local municipalities as a result of the social transfers. They are vitally important. We are going to continue to make those investments.

I can think of a great number of programs that have had an impact, for example, our retirement homes. We have funded programs through our economic action plan. We were fortunate enough to fund a program jointly with the province and the county for a retirement home in Bluewater municipality. This will provide seniors, even those low income seniors, with an opportunity to live out their remaining years in dignity, in a beautiful place.

Members should look at all our government has done in five and a half years and what we continue to do. Not that long ago a previous government slashed transfers to the provinces, which put pressure on

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the provinces, the municipalities and the counties. They could not deliver these services.

We have gone through the greatest recession and depression in my lifetime. This government chose to continue to deliver to the provinces and the municipalities, so that those at risk would not be left behind. They were able to continue to provide the services that they provided in the past, and that is vitally important.

Back in the nineties, the previous government slashed programs and those most at risk, those most vulnerable, were hurt the most, were impacted the most.

We will continue with our programs. Through our stimulus programs, through our economic action plan, we have made great investments in our municipalities. This will make life better for those at risk, for those low income Canadians.

I would like to thank the House for the opportunity to speak to this issue. It is one that I am passionate about. If all of us in the House work together, we can make a difference in a great many lives of seniors and those at risk.

● (1305)

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Huron—Bruce says he is passionate about this issue. However, I detected a distinct absence of passion and perhaps even an absence of recognition that we are facing a demographic crisis in this country as an aging population is left with insufficient resources to enjoy the dignified senior years that he was waxing eloquently about a couple of minutes ago.

Let me ask him about the double whammy that is facing us.

In the post-war years, we tried to address seniors' poverty and we did put in place measures that drastically reduced seniors' poverty. However, that curve has turned. It has hit bottom and is rising back up again. At a time that we have this exploding demographic blip of baby boomers reaching their retirement years, we have an assault on pensions; not only an unwillingness to increase the state-sponsored pensions but Thomas d'Aquino, in his wisdom, 10 years ago declared war on the defined benefit pension system and then he systematically set about to attack it at every turn. Now they are blaming so-called legacy costs on lack of productivity. It is an attack on pensions just when the demographics of the country indicate and dictate that we should be expanding, broadening and enhancing pensions.

How does the member explain this contradiction and a lack of action by his government on either of those fronts?

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Speaker, it is important to note that anybody receiving a defined benefit pension would not be eligible for the guaranteed income supplement. The likelihood of that would virtually be zero. We need to be clear in what we are talking about.

The member has been in this House a lot longer than I have. However, just in the last three budgets, he sat in this House, at that time down at the far end, and voted against money for seniors in each and every budget.

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There comes a time when rhetoric is deafening. He can stand and rail all day long. However, at the end of the day his voting record is what counts. When he votes against new money for seniors each and every year, against new money for affordable housing each and every year, it speaks volumes. That should be his record that he will have to deal with.

• (1310)

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do appreciate the comments just made by my hon. colleague. I want to thank him for bringing the Conservative government's record to the House. It is important that people watching, especially senior citizens, know the important measures that are available to them, many of which have been brought forward by the Conservative government.

Oftentimes the hon. member for Winnipeg Centre talks about the necessity of looking at the facts, looking at statistics. What we know today is that while it is still a number that is unacceptable, we only have 5.8% of seniors living under the poverty rate. This is the best in the developed world.

Let us look at the record, though. That is 5.8% in comparison to what? In comparison to what it was in 2003, when the rate was 6.8%. If we go even further back, it was 7.9% in 1999. So, clearly, the measures that have been brought forward by the Conservative government are truly resonating in reality. That is what we need to continue to look at.

I wonder if the member has any comments with regard to the statistics.

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Speaker, we all know the guaranteed income supplement is recalculated in July. This is when changes can happen for our seniors where they would possibly receive this increased benefit. We are near the end of June. There is a lot of pressure, a lot of expectation, to put on our civil servants to be able to deliver, when we were faced with an unnecessary election. Now, two months later, had this budget and this legislation gone through, those lowest income seniors would know what paycheque they would be receiving, they would know when they would be receiving it, and they would know how much they would be receiving.

With the election, and the member for Winnipeg Centre wanted the election, he has put the dollars in question, the dollars in jeopardy for our low income seniors, our most at risk seniors.

Again, the NDP's voting record says one thing, but its voting record tells a completely different story.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there was a plethora of issues in the member's speech that one can take exception to.

For example, in talking about Canada's low rate of poverty for seniors, I thought the member was going to acknowledge the Liberal Party for bringing in the GIS in the first place, and instead his comments were that it was in spite of opposition parties that we are in that situation.

I do need to comment that instead of being here for low income Canadians, the government has regressive tax credits that exclude low income Canadians.

In a place like Vancouver, where rent, housing costs and property taxes are sky-high and going up, there are many seniors in my riding of Vancouver Quadra who can barely hang on to their homes or their apartments that they rent because of these costs. The question that I want to pose to the member is this. How can a GIS increase of less than \$2 a day help lift these seniors out of poverty when other costs like food are climbing as well?

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Speaker, the first thing I would like to offer to the member for Vancouver Quadra is that the \$300 million to the guaranteed income supplement, I would argue, is far better invested than the \$300 million that she voted on to spend on election signs and campaigns ads.

The member is in the House trying to lecture us, when she is one who voted to spend \$300 million on election signs.

With our efforts in our budgets, 85,000 seniors have been removed from the tax roll. We have had to drag the opposition, kicking and screaming, to take these seniors off the tax rolls. A single senior can earn just a little over \$19,000, and a couple can earn a little over \$38,000 without paying tax.

Now the opposition has to be dragged, kicking and screaming, to convince them it is a good idea. I do not know what they are offering, but it is not as good as what we are offering. Again, here we go, \$300 million for an election, that is what they supported. We support \$300 million for seniors.

• (1315)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when I arrived here, I realized that no one in this chamber is poor. We all have good salaries and nice cars, and we have reasonably comfortable lives.

I grew up in reality. In my riding, I see people who face reality every day and who know what it is like to survive in the current economic conditions. The most insulting thing for them is to be told by someone who makes \$160,000 a year that, if you are poor, it is because you are not good at managing your budget. I think that is a bit insulting to the public.

I would like my colleagues on the other side of the House to be more sensitive to the daily reality facing the public. Earlier, when my colleague was speaking about the unbearable poverty experienced by some retirees, the members on the other side of the House were chatting and snickering. I think that is insulting to the public.

[*English*]

Mr. Ben Lobb: Mr. Speaker, I do not know what the member opposite was listening to. He must have had the wrong channel.

I was describing a story about a young woman in Huron County who attended a program and learned about budgeting. I never said people were in poverty because they cannot manage their money. I am saying there is a program that the federal government supported through Status of Women to help women have another tool in their tool belt for their life. Is that not great? Is that not just the best thing we have ever heard?

Here is the bad news for this new member, your party voted against that initiative. With all due respect, it should be you who apologize in this House for voting against this.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Before we resume debate, I want to remind all hon. members that when you are speaking, asking questions or responding, it is the Chair to whom you are speaking. There have been a few instances this morning when hon. members have not been sufficiently mindful of that.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Gatineau.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the comments from the hon. member for Laurentides—Labelle, who is completely right. I believe we should come here with the single goal of representing the people who elected us. The people who elected us are real, flesh-and-blood people. Increasingly, our population is aging. I cannot believe that someone here today would vote against a motion that states the following:

That, in the opinion of this House, ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible, and, therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the Guaranteed Income Supplement sufficiently to achieve that goal.

We are talking about seniors, but I am also thinking about the children who were supposed to be lifted out of poverty by the year 2000. It is 2011 and that has not happened. I am thinking about the most vulnerable people, about seniors. The NDP campaigned on that. I will not let the members on the other side say that we voted against a measure that would have lifted seniors out of poverty; the government is offering mere peanuts. In all good conscience, we cannot accept peanuts. Supporting that type of measure would have been an insult to the seniors we represent. Members opposite are saying that I should go back to my Gatineau riding today and tell my constituents that I am proud to be offering a dollar and a bit to Gatineau seniors living below the poverty line. Shame on us all. That is what I am saying.

• (1320)

We have been elected to this House and we often hear about the Conservative government's strong mandate. That "strong mandate" was only 40%. Personally, I would never have passed law school with marks of 40%. However, because of our electoral system, the Conservatives now form the government. So be it. That being said, they must respect the fact that 60% of the population said "no" to their regressive policies, which do not work for the people we are supposed to be representing here.

My hon. colleague from Laurentides—Labelle is quite right. Everyone here today now receives a decent salary and does not have to worry about a pension, unless we are not re-elected, and we enjoy benefits that many people would love to have. I think that offering such a pitiful amount is positively shameful, when what we should do is stop playing petty politics at the expense of our most vulnerable Canadians. We need to get organized. Some people might wonder how much more money is needed. We need to determine how many seniors are living below the poverty line and give these people the means to afford somewhere to live.

I had a look at the NDP's seniors charter. In my riding, I won with 62% of the vote because my priorities are seniors, health and the

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things that affect our everyday lives. Any time I speak to my constituents, I will tell them that I am here to represent their interests.

There are people who simply cannot bathe more than twice a week. These are the seniors who have been placed in a seniors' centre, and since the state is taking care of them, people tend to forget about them. However, the state is taking care of them by giving them just one bath a week and so on. That is how our seniors are being treated. These people gave their all to our country. I find this appalling. When it comes to this kind of issue, it makes me really angry to see how people are playing petty politics.

It is true. It never fails. It was the same in 2004. I forgot to mention, Mr. Speaker, that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Rainy River. I know I should I have mentioned it sooner. I had even noted it at the top.

I forgot to mention it because I was so struck by the comments by the member opposite. He had the nerve to tell the hon. member for Winnipeg Centre that he voted against a measure for seniors. That is an insult to his intelligence. I hope that those watching us on television are able to fully understand that the people on this side of the House are working on one thing only and that is to provide them with decent and humane measures. We will not let the members opposite say otherwise. And when the Conservatives lost the last time, it was not, by the way, because of their budget. It was over ethics, over breaching the trust of the House. We are going to put things back into perspective.

It seems that adopting measures in Canada's Parliament does not amount to a hill of beans, because in 2006, the NDP seniors charter was adopted, but was never given royal assent. What did the charter say? I think it is awful that the charter was not enacted. It called on the government to work with the provinces, saying, "That, in the opinion of the House, the government should rectify decades of underfunding of seniors programs by creating a Seniors Charter that recognizes older Canadians as creative, active and valued members of our society, and that this Charter shall enshrine the right of every senior living in Canada to the following...".

It is hard to imagine that this has not been enacted yet.

This is what was guaranteed: income security, through protected pensions and indexed public income support that provides a reasonable state of economic welfare—I do not see why there is opposition to that; housing, through secure, accessible and affordable housing; wellness, through health promotion and preventative care; health care, through secure, public, accessible, universal health care including primary care, dental care, home care, palliative and geriatric care and pharmacare; self-development, through lifelong access to affordable recreation, education and training.

These are normal things that should be provided for every human being. I cannot understand how anyone can be against this. But what is even harder to fathom—and now I am speaking as the critic for the status of women—is the fact that most seniors living below the poverty line are women and they are being ignored day after day.

Business of Supply

•(1325)

You have to walk through long-term care facilities and low-income housing to see the conditions in which these people live. I cannot fathom why, year after year, the Conservative government cuts funding for groups that, on a shoestring budget, work on getting people out of poverty, and prevents them from doing their work.

This evening, who will be voting against a motion that simply asks the government to take immediate action to increase the guaranteed income supplement enough to get these people out of poverty? I can hardly wait to see the results of the vote.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened with intent to what the member said, and, in particular, about voting records. That member's party voted against the economic action plan, which has obviously saved the country from the downturn in the economy and many thousands of jobs. In fact, we have created more than a half million jobs since this started, with consecutive quarters of straight growth.

How can the member sit in a party that voted against Quebeckers, against improvements in roads and bridges and against multiplexes? In particular, it voted against the \$1 billion for a green infrastructure fund for the country. It voted against \$1 billion for clean energy. That is the part I do not understand.

In fact, in Quebec there are many contaminated sites and the economic action plan looked at investments there as well, and her party voted against that.

How does she justify that today, especially given that infrastructure is used by seniors throughout the country and that was the largest investment for infrastructure in the history of the country in real dollar terms? How does she justify sitting on that side now when her party voted against that?

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, I always have difficulty listening to any Conservative member who puts the word "green" in his or her speech.

[*Translation*]

The Conservatives could have lifted many seniors out of poverty using only the money that was invested in signs for the government's action plan, which they made a point of posting here, there and everywhere over the past year. That would have been a good start.

The hon. member is asking me how I can sit on this side of the House. It is very easy, because over here, we think that people should take priority over bricks and mortar.

It is all well and good to have nice roads and I am in favour of nice roads and bridges, but they will not do us much good if people cannot even use them because they cannot afford to buy a vehicle or to use public transit. We have before us a question of priorities and budget management. The answer is not to spend more money; the NDP is not going to drive the country into bankruptcy. Rather, instead of giving the head of a large corporation \$1 million in profits, why not give him \$500,000 and give the rest to someone else?

[*English*]

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, will the member from the New Democratic Party, as well the party as a whole, join with me and the Liberal Party of Canada in protecting the rights of seniors and protecting the financial viability of seniors regarding changes that have occurred through the guaranteed income supplement program?

Changes occurred back on May 17, 2010, when seniors lost the capacity or right to what is known as optioning out income regarding removals or withdrawals from their registered retirement income funds for the purposes of calculating their overall income under the guaranteed income supplement program.

A decision was taken stemming from what was known as the Ward decision back in 2007 in which the Government of Canada sued a GIS recipient for improper benefits and the court struck down certain provisions that allowed seniors to option out certain elements of their income. The government has never responded by changing the law. The court advised the government to change the law to allow this to occur, but the court said that under the current wording of the Old Age Security Act, that provision was not acceptable.

•(1330)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Françoise Boivin: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member's first comment was interesting.

[*English*]

He asked if we would join him. We had a lengthy discussion this past weekend on that. We were willing to discuss it, but that is pretty much it.

That being said, on the decision of the court and the fact that it takes a while to implement, I am not sure the NDP feels the government is in tune with the core of the decision.

[*Translation*]

However, what I would like to tell the members of the Liberal Party of Canada is that, while they will likely vote with us on this motion, it would have been so nice if they had dealt with the problem of child and seniors' poverty when they had a majority government and a lot of money in the bank.

[*English*]

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to stand today to speak about this issue, particularly since seniors in my riding of Thunder Bay—Rainy River are suffering terribly. I am going to relate a couple of stories. I start to tear up when I even think about them, but I will talk about them in a minute.

This issue is not like finding a needle in a haystack. It is as easy as finding hay in a haystack and we can do it. What New Democrats said in their platform they have always stood for, which I will read. It states:

We will increase the annual Guaranteed Income Supplement to a sufficient level in the first budget to lift every senior in Canada out of poverty immediately.

Business of Supply

We can do that. Retirement security has always been a priority of the New Democratic Party. It has always been a priority of parties which came before it. In 1927 was the very first pension legislation in this country, brought in by the Independent Labour Party, one of the NDP's forerunners. When New Democrats speak about this motion today, we speak from authority, from history and decades and decades of trying to ensure that seniors do not live in poverty.

What we are faced with now is about 250,000 seniors in this country living in poverty. The debate is not even so much about GIS or CPP as it is about respect and dignity. Those are two things we in the NDP want to talk about today because respect and dignity are what many of our seniors do not have.

I conducted a telephone town hall meeting before the election and there were 8,500 people on the line from my riding. Overwhelmingly, the two things people mentioned in that meeting as being most important were affordability and retirement security. I suspect that is felt right across this country in every riding, rural and urban.

In this budget the Conservatives talk about \$1.64 a day for seniors. Everyone in the House will remember that the government, along with the governments of Ontario and British Columbia, conspired to charge seniors an average of \$3 a day in HST. That is the average seniors pay in HST. They get \$1.64 in this budget, which the government says is fabulous, and with the other hand it takes away \$3, and probably much more, in HST.

The hon. member who spoke before me talked about apologizing. I think it is the government that should apologize. It is the government that should apologize for \$1.64 a day and saying that is enough for seniors, for respect and for dignity. It is not.

The most vulnerable group among seniors is women. Women make up about 70% of poor seniors in this country. The poverty rate for women in this country in 2008 was double that of men. For seniors who live in poverty, almost 100% of their incomes come from the government. Therefore, \$1.64 a day makes me sad.

If the government simply looked at it in economic terms and took away the human element of its decisions, lifting every senior out of poverty in this country is good for this country. It is good for the economy. Where do seniors spend their money? They spend their money in the local communities where they live and they just want an opportunity to buy a present for their grandchildren on their birthdays. That is all they want. They spend it right in their own communities. Therefore, \$700 million to lift every senior out of poverty is \$700 million that goes right back into local economies.

• (1335)

I want to speak very briefly about some of the seniors I have met in my riding. If people need health care in my riding, they have two choices: Those living in the west end of my riding can go to Winnipeg; if they live on the east side, they go to Thunder Bay. I am not sure how every province works, but Ontario has travel grants. However, people have to put the money out first.

To go from Atikokan to Thunder Bay return costs \$300. We do not have trains. We have the occasional bus that goes by. It is either in a private car or a taxi. It is \$160 for a one-way trip. People have to put that money out first.

I know seniors who do not go to the hospital when they are supposed to, who do not follow up on appointments because they cannot put the money out first. I know seniors who do not take their medications. They do not buy their medications because they cannot. Or, they split them. They take half every day, or use any other strategy they can to try to save money.

Let me give one example of the face of poverty in my riding. In Atikokan not too long ago, I was speaking with a senior, a man probably in his 80s. His wife had passed away. He had raised four children. They were all gone from the community. He came in to see me one day and he said he could not pay his electricity bill. I asked if he had tried some strategies to reduce the use of electricity. He told me that he uses one light bulb and every second day he unplugs the refrigerator.

The HST from the government was the turning point for that man, for his electricity. That is what seniors go through in this country. That is what seniors go through in my riding.

I know, although there may be members of Parliament here who do not agree or do not see this, it happens in every riding.

What are the other impacts in my riding? Speaking about longevity of seniors, we all go to funerals, or read in the paper about seniors dying. We think that they should not have passed away, that it was too early for them to go. For seniors who have to live below the poverty line, we are talking about malnutrition, depression and suicide.

The biggest indicator of seniors' longevity is the number of friends they have. I do not know if people here know that. How many friends a senior has determines how long that senior will live. However, I know seniors and I talk to seniors all the time who do not have many or any friends. That is because they live below the poverty line and they are embarrassed. What could they invite their friends over to their house for? What could they serve them? What could they talk about? So, gradually seniors lose their friends. It is not because their friends do not want to spend time with them, but because they are embarrassed to spend time with their friends. That is sad, because those seniors will have a whole host of health issues and die before their time.

What can we do? What are the choices? If we do not buy one F-35 jet, that would be enough to lift every senior out of poverty for two years. If we ended the corporate giveaways to big oil companies and banks, we would have more than enough money to lift every senior out of poverty in this country forever.

• (1340)

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as mentioned by my colleague earlier, we have just come through one of the largest global recessions since the Great Depression and the poverty rate for seniors has gone down from 7.9% over a decade or so ago to 5.8%. That is a credible change and it has a lot to do with the action our government has taken. I think 5.8% is too high.

Business of Supply

In the last session our government brought legislation forward to increase the GIS, to increase funding for seniors. Each and every one of those members automatically stood and opposed every initiative that our government put forward to help seniors. I wonder if my colleague could respond to that.

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that comment because it allows me an opportunity to say that in this country we cannot afford to have any senior living in poverty. We cannot afford to have anyone living in poverty in this country.

Government members talk about NDP members not supporting the Conservative agenda. Let me just talk about their collusion with Premier McGuinty in Ontario on the HST. If they want to know why we on this side of the House do not stand up to support them on that it is because they are costing not just every person in Ontario, but particularly seniors who live in poverty in Ontario. The Conservative government is making them poorer. Why would we stand on this side of the House and tell the government that we support what it is doing, that we support it putting seniors right across Canada back into more poverty?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to highlight a couple of quick points followed by a question.

New Democrats seem to be focused on dealing with the income increase, yet at the same time there are many other aspects to getting seniors out of poverty. We need to take a holistic approach. Many different factors would go a long way toward bringing seniors out of poverty.

Toward the end of his remarks my colleague made reference to the cancellation of one jet aircraft. He indicated that would cover the cost of what New Democrats are suggesting.

I have no question in terms of priorities. We in the Liberal Party believe that the government's priorities, the corporate tax breaks, the millions that are being spent on a number of fighter aircraft, are all wrong. With the wealth that Canada has, why are we not treating our seniors better than we are and attempting to lift them out of poverty?

Do the NDP numbers tell them that the cancellation of one aircraft would more than cover the cost of bringing seniors out of poverty?

• (1345)

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, there actually are a number of questions in that question.

I agree with my hon. colleague that we have to take a multi-pronged approach to poverty in this country, seniors' poverty in particular. There is one thing that we can immediately do. We talk about doubling CPP over the next 7 to 10 years. We talk about a number of other strategies that would help seniors to ensure that they would have an opportunity to put a little money in their pockets so they can buy a present for their grandchild on his or her birthday. The GIS increase would provide immediate relief for seniors. I know members on the other side of the aisle agree with me.

The government said it would do something in the budget but they are always quarter measures, always tenth measures. They are not the measures that need to be taken. There is no real commitment from the government to ensure that seniors do not live in poverty in this country.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is an important issue as seniors are important to all of us. We all have important seniors in our lives. As a matter of fact I spent yesterday with some important seniors in my life, my grandparents, my dad's mom and dad, as well as my mom's mom. I had an opportunity to hear from them and hear their concerns with regard to what the government can do. My grandma just wants to let everybody here know that she needs her mail. If hon. members will do what they can to get that passed, I know my baba would be very appreciative that we brought that to the House today.

In terms of the debate today, we have an important discussion before us that we should be deliberating knowing a number of facts, which I will get into. The most important fact is to recognize that no two seniors are identical. We cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach to seniors in the same way we cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach to child care or any other issue facing our government today.

Therefore, it is important for us to consider that there are many seniors who are in a whole host of different circumstances across this country. That is why it is important that we have a whole host of different measures that we bring forward to address concerns facing seniors today.

It is important to recognize that we have seniors who are still in the marketplace. They are still working and still contributing in paid employment. Just because they are in the workforce does not mean that they are affluent. I know many people who are in the workforce simply because they feel that they need to be.

We also know there are seniors who are facing health difficulties, challenges with regard to their health care, but there are also seniors who are very healthy. Today we have a seniors' population in this country that is growing older than any generation before and they are healthier than any other generation before.

I am pleased to stand in this House today to talk about the many ways that our government is addressing the concerns of seniors, including the \$300 million top up to the guaranteed income supplement. This is an important initiative that is being brought forward.

In both budgets 2011, the budget brought forward before the election and the budget brought forward after the election, and during the election campaign our government came forward and said that it would contribute \$300 million to top up the guaranteed income supplement. That is an important thing that we all need to recognize our government is committed to doing.

Business of Supply

In my riding of Peace River, I met a many seniors who were very concerned and confused during the election campaign. On one side they had a government that brought forward a budget that had a number of measures that were very important to senior citizens. It was not just the \$300 million that would be dedicated toward the GIS. There were a whole host of other things in the budget that were important to senior citizens as well. They were very confused as to how the opposition parties could justify calling an opportunistic and unnecessary election that would cost over \$300 million to run in the face of the reality that we were under fiscal constraints. They knew personally that they could benefit from the measures that had been brought forward and had been stalled as a result of the opposition parties' torpedoing that budget and the budget measures that were included in that document.

Canadians are living longer and healthier lives. It is different from pretty much any other generation before. That means that our seniors are depending on their retirement income for longer periods of time.

As we work to help Canadians achieve their financial security, it is important that our government and all members in this House recognize that things are changing and seniors are living longer and, therefore, we must consider the reality of both.

The most important thing that I believe government can do, or does, is provide seniors with support through our public pension system. This system is highly effective. It is internationally regarded, and for good reason.

This year, Canadians will receive almost \$70 billion in benefits through the Canadian pension plan, old age security and the GIS, or guaranteed income supplement. The GIS, which provides extra support to seniors with little or no income, has been a great success in reducing poverty among seniors.

• (1350)

It is important to recognize the facts, and today, during the debate, it is one that is being engaged in. We have anecdotes that are coming forward from all sides. It is important to look at the facts because if we drill down into these facts we will have some revelations that are important for all of us to consider.

It is important for Canadians and for all of us in the House to recognize that Canada has one of the lowest poverty rates among seniors in the developed world at 5.8%. Now 5.8% is still a number that is too high, because there is nobody in the House who would like to see a single senior living below the poverty line, but let us recognize that this is a significant improvement over years past. This rate is lower now than it has ever been under previous governments. It was 6.8% in 2003 and, if we look even further back, it was 7.9% in 1999.

It is important that when we recognize that Canada not only has one of the lowest rates of senior poverty in the world, we recognize a time and a place in which we are seeing this happen. We have just witnessed one of the worst economic meltdowns that we have seen in the last number of generations, the great recession, and it is in this environment that Canada is seeing one of the lowest rates of senior poverty to date.

I watch the news, as do members across the aisle, and we see that, in other countries, simply holding on to the benefits that had been

allocated to seniors over past years is the gold standard. As we see governments having to strip away benefits that have been previously allocated to senior citizens, in Canada we are not only saving all of the things that have been provided to senior citizens over the last number of years, we are improving them because, not only do we have one of the lowest rates of senior poverty in history in this country today but in the world as well, we are working to improve and reduce that even further.

Our government's prudent and fiscally responsible economic approach is working. That is why Canadian seniors overwhelmingly supported our government's initiatives during the last election. The new guaranteed income supplement top up will target the poorest and the most vulnerable seniors, providing an additional annual benefit of up to \$600 a year for single seniors or \$840 a year for senior couples. This measure represents an investment of more than \$300 million per year and will further improve the financial security and the well-being of more than 680,000 seniors across this great nation.

It will also represent the single biggest increase in the guaranteed income supplement in over 25 years, and it is affordable without raising taxes. It is an important distinction that I am bringing here. While the opposition parties have committed all kinds of plans of spending billions and billions of dollars on a whole host of different programs, they have also committed to raising taxes on Canadians and Canadian seniors as well.

Looking at what the difference is with regard to what the parties are proposing, I wonder why the opposition parties voted against budget 2011 and why they forced an unnecessary and opportunistic election on the Canadian people, sacrificing over \$300 million in government spending that could have been allocated toward benefiting seniors.

I cannot complain about the results of the election but I must question the motivation of the opposition parties with regard to the forcing of the election. I have to wonder why Canadians from coast to coast elected a Conservative majority government.

• (1355)

After talking to people in my riding, and specifically seniors, it has become crystal clear to me that they believe in the plan this government has brought forward. They recognize that it is a prudent and fiscally responsible plan.

Our government has done a whole host of things since we were elected in 2006 and it is important to reflect on some of them. As we look at the reality of the statistics, we have seen the lowest rate of poverty levels among seniors today due to the measures our government has brought forward.

Statements by Members

It is important to recognize that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution to the issues concerning seniors, which is why we brought forward a whole host of different measures. They include: an increase to the age credit by \$1,000 twice, benefiting 2.2 million senior citizens; the pension income credit was doubled to \$2,000; pension income splitting for senior couples was introduced; the age limit for registered retirement savings plans was increased from 69 years to 71 years of age; and, the minimum registered retirement income fund withdrawal was reduced by 25% providing over \$200 million in tax relief to seniors.

Before those measures were introduced, those people were paying taxes. Today, as a result of these measures, 85,000 Canadian seniors no longer pay federal income tax. In 2011, a single senior earning around \$19,000 and a senior couple earning at least \$38,000 would not pay any federal income tax at all. I can say that this is greatly appreciated by seniors in my riding

When I talk to senior citizens, many of them want to continue to play an important role in the workforce. It is important that governments continue to encourage people who have reached the age of 65, or an age at which they are recognized as a senior citizen, to stay in the workforce and be allowed to do so. I think we as Canadians benefit from having senior citizens in the workforce contributing in so many unique and important ways.

• (1400)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. I must interrupt the member at this point. When the House returns to this matter, the hon. member for Peace River will have seven minutes remaining.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Mr. Royal Galipeau (Ottawa—Orléans, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the National Research Council has a proud history that goes back 95 years. Some of its key accomplishments are the pacemaker, computer animation technology and the Canadarm.

[Translation]

It has relied on great leaders like Jack Mackenzie, Larkin Kerwin and now, John McDougall. For over 30 years, I have stood up for the NRC and its cutting-edge science.

[English]

For the past five years, in this House and elsewhere, I have promoted the establishment of the technology transfer centre to better market the intellectual property of the NRC.

[Translation]

That is why I am proud that this government has granted the NRC stable funding that has increased by 17% over the last five years, to fund research, help businesses and stimulate the economy.

[English]

On top of that, I was pleased to announce two years ago temporary two-year stimulus funding to the NRC under Canada's economic action plan.

[Translation]

As Canada's primary research agency, the NRC continues to benefit from the strong financial support of the government.

* * *

REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to thank the voters of my riding of Saint-Maurice—Champlain for placing their trust in me in the May 2 election.

I would like to point out to the hon. members that the residents of La Tuque, the birthplace of Félix Leclerc, are celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of their city this year. A number of activities will be held during the summer to mark the occasion.

I would also like to highlight the efforts made by the city of Shawinigan to create new, original, dynamic industries in response to the many economic shocks that have hit the wood processing industry.

My constituents have shown courage and determination as they struggle to deal with the restructuring of the global economy. I would like to take this opportunity to let them know that they can count on my continued support in the search for viable economic solutions for the regions.

* * *

[English]

AFGHANISTAN

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, mission accomplished. Now that Operation Athena, Canada's participation in the International Security Assistance Force, ISAF, in Afghanistan is drawing to a close, it is with great pride that I recognize the more than 8,500 CFB Petawawa-based military personnel who served in Afghanistan. It has been a long haul from when troops were put on the ground back in 2002.

Our men and women in uniform are motivated by a love of comradeship and a desire to serve our country. We will never forget those soldiers who paid the ultimate sacrifice for Canada.

Canadians recognize efforts to bring stability and the rule of law to Afghanistan. As a result, there has been a significant transformation in attitude in Canada as a result of our mission in Afghanistan.

A decade ago, many commentators had written off our military: no more. We have gone from being NATO's biggest freeloader to becoming a respected member of the Western Alliance.

A grateful nation says thanks.

*Statements by Members***HUMAN RIGHTS WALKWAY**

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, on July 1, Canada Day, the municipality of Côte Saint-Luc, in my riding of Mount Royal, will induct Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, honorary Canadian citizen, Nobel Peace Laureate and a great heroine of our time, into the municipality's Human Rights Walkway.

Aung San Suu Kyi will join the pantheon of human rights heroes in the walkway, which include: Raoul Wallenberg, Canada's first honorary citizen; former chief justices Antonio Lamer and Gilles Deschênes of the Supreme Court of Canada and the Superior Court of Quebec, respectively; international jurists René Cassin and John Humphrey; and aboriginal heroine Mary Two-Axe Early.

[*Translation*]

I would like to commend the mayor of Côte Saint-Luc, Anthony Housefather, as well as the members of the city council, who have made the promotion and protection of human rights a priority in their work.

* * *

• (1405)

CANADIAN HERITAGE

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to congratulate you on your election as Speaker. Above all, I would like to warmly thank the people in the riding of Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher who chose to express their social democratic values by giving me the mandate to represent them. It is a privilege and a responsibility that I will honour with dedication and pride.

I would also like to thank the volunteers, without whom, we all know, political life would be very difficult. Thank you to the three women in my life who supported me in this great endeavour: my daughters, Marilou and Rose, as well as their mother, Johanne. I would also like to thank a fourth woman, my mother, who is 80 and who has tirelessly supported the NDP for more than 20 years. She, too, put in time and hard work.

As the sport critic and deputy Canadian heritage critic, I will ensure, for one, that the Pointe-de-Longueuil development project benefits everyone in Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher by improving the bike path network and its access to the Longueuil metro. Above all, I will ensure that people in the riding again have natural access to the banks of the St. Lawrence.

* * *

[*English*]

CITY OF BRAMPTON

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the city of Brampton, also known as the Flower City, and its residents on holding its immensely successful sixth Flower City Parade. The parade is a great way to start off the summer. It allows all Bramptonians the opportunity to connect with our community and its heritage, as well as enjoy the day of entertainment and fun. The event drew thousands of Bramptonians to the downtown core to watch the float and entertainers.

This year's parade had a unique theme. It was "Brampton Welcomes Bollywood". As the International Indian Film Academy award celebrations are set to begin in the GTA this week, Brampton also welcomed numerous Bollywood stars during the parade.

The event was a tremendous success. I want to acknowledge hundreds of volunteers for the hard work that went into planning and executing such a great event for all Bramptonians to enjoy.

* * *

BIRTHDAY WISHES

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to pay tribute to Mr. Alex Sim of Kamloops as he celebrates his 86th birthday today with 419 Squadron in Cold Lake, Alberta.

At the age of 16, Mr. Sim tried to join the RCAF during the Second World War, but was rejected because of his age. Undeterred, he joined the Canadian army and participated in the Normandy campaign and later served in the Korean War.

Although he went on to a successful career in the army, his passion has always been for flight. He served as president of the Pacific Group of the Air Force Association and as a member of the 886 (Overlander) Wing in Kamloops.

Over the years, he served as a liaison officer between 419 Squadron and 886 Wing. Last year, he was recognized for his years of service and given the honorary title of commanding officer of 419 Squadron.

Recognized by his feisty presence, commanding voice and impressive historical knowledge, please join me in wishing Mr. Sim a happy birthday and to thank him for his dedication to the armed forces and our country.

* * *

[*Translation*]

REPENTIGNY RELAY FOR LIFE

Mr. Jean-François Larose (Repentigny, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to thank my constituents, the people of Repentigny, for placing their trust in me on May 2.

My riding is a great place to live. Proof of this is the fact that, even though a multinational like Electrolux is closing, even though families and seniors are getting poorer, and even though our SMEs are overtaxed, the people in my riding still managed to join forces, open their hearts, donate their time and even empty their piggy banks for a good cause: the fight against cancer. The Repentigny Relay for Life, which was held last Friday, has become one of the largest in Canada. Together they raised the unprecedented amount of a little over \$500,000 and organized an unforgettable evening.

I call on this government to reconsider its budget, to scrape together what it can and to give more to the people who are our everyday heroes.

*Statements by Members***SUMMER FESTIVALS IN MONCTON-RIVERVIEW-DIEPPE**

Mr. Robert Goguen (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to start by congratulating you on your election as Speaker of the House. I would also like to thank the voters of my riding for the confidence they have placed in me and for giving me the opportunity to sit here in Parliament.

[English]

As members know, we are quickly moving into the summer festival events. This is of course a time of many celebrations of much joy. High school students will soon be getting their grade 12 diplomas. I would like to recognize those diploma recipients who are from the high schools in my riding: École Mathieu-Martin; École L'Odysée; Moncton High; Harrison Trimble; Bernice MacNaughton High School; and Riverview High School.

There are also many other celebrations: tomorrow, June 21, National Aboriginal Day; Saint Jean Baptiste Day on June 24; Multicultural Day on June 26; Canada Day; and la Fête nationale des Acadiens on August 15.

However, the most important celebration that each one of us will have on both sides of this chamber is going about with our constituents at various barbecues, celebrating the most important event this year, May 2, the election of that stable national Conservative government.

* * *

●(1410)

PRODUCT SAFETY

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I rise today for the first time in the House, I would like to thank the good people of Mississauga East—Cooksville who placed their trust in me.

I would also recognize the coming into force of the consumer product safety legislation. Passed unanimously by the House, the new legislation reflects our government's commitment to the health and safety of Canadians. Canadian parents want to ensure their children's products are safe and the new customer protection law ensures government has the ability to act when unsafe products are sold in Canada.

I am pleased to announce that, as of today, these new rules, supported by all members of this place, will be in effect.

This is yet another example of our Conservative government's commitment to Canadians, resulting in the positive action that has been welcomed by consumer groups and parent across our country.

* * *

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL DAY

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, tomorrow is National Aboriginal Day. Under the umbrella of KAIROS, more than 200 representatives of Canadian church congregations today join aboriginal representatives in dramatically demonstrating their nationwide support for our action on the rights and interests of all of Canada's aboriginal peoples. Both church representatives and aboriginal leaders have reminded us that the

outstanding international commitments to the rights of indigenous peoples needs action now.

The Auditor General has reported that not only has the government failed to act on the majority of the recommendations made over the last decade, conditions have worsened for first nations housing, education and basic necessities of life, a disparity he found unacceptable in a country as rich as Canada.

However, I am confident that together with the New Democrat aboriginal commission, we will bring heightened energy and attention to the significant challenges facing Canadian first nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

I encourage all members of the House to join us in tomorrow's celebrations.

* * *

WORLD REFUGEE DAY

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to recognize World Refugee Day.

Canada has a long history of providing protection to those who need it. As a Canadian, I am proud of our compassionate tradition. Canada's refugee programs are world renowned for their fairness and generosity. In fact, last year Canada welcomed more refugees resettled through the UN than any other country in the world per capita.

For example, we have welcomed more than 2,300 Bhutanese refugees in several communities across Canada and we plan to resettle up to 5,000 more Bhutanese refugees from Nepal over the next few years. As well, we have almost completed the resettlement of over 3,900 Karen from Thailand.

Today I urge all Canadians to reflect on the courage of the millions of refugees and displaced persons around the world who are fleeing persecution, tyranny and oppression.

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WORLD SICKLE CELL AWARENESS DAY

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday was World Sickle Cell Awareness Day, a day to spread the word about a disease known to the western world for 100 years and to recognize and celebrate the courage of those living with sickle cell, a genetic blood disorder.

Sickle cell disease affects blood cells which carry oxygen throughout our bodies. In Sickle cell disease, red blood cells harden into long slivers that block veins and arteries, causing injury to blood vessels of organs, including the brain and lung. About 10% of children develop strokes. Children with sickle cell are also extremely vulnerable to infection and have periodic health crises that cause terrible pain and difficulty breathing.

Last week I tabled Bill C-221, An Act respecting a Comprehensive National Strategy for Sickle Cell Disease and Thalassaemic Disorders. I hope all hon. members will educate themselves on this devastating disease and support families who cope with it.

* * *

●(1415)

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP clearly demonstrated this weekend that it is out of touch with Canadian families, workers and seniors.

With its high tax plan, the NDP is not fit to govern or to lead Canada through the fragile global economic recovery.

It is also demonstrating how reckless it would be to national unity by promising to re-open the Constitution and by allowing many sovereigntist MPs to sit within its caucus. NDP recklessness would help pave the way to a third referendum on Quebec sovereignty.

The NDP's attempt to make it look like it is modernizing and shedding some of its radical ideology is misleading. It is not really changing and it is leaving many of its most dangerous policies in place.

Our Conservative government represents the interests of families, workers and seniors. Our government received a strong mandate to advance the interests of hard-working Canadians from coast to coast to coast, unlike the NDP that prefers to listen to special interest groups and big unions.

* * *

[Translation]

LISTUGUJ MI'GMAQ

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is the 30th anniversary of Listuguj raids. On June 11, 1981, armed provincial police officers and fisheries officers raided that Mi'gmaq community, arrested residents and seized their boats in order to prevent them from commercially fishing salmon.

It was 30 years ago today, on June 20, 1981, that the provincial government ordered a second raid, but this time, the residents of Listuguj erected barricades to prevent access to their community. In 1993, the Mi'gmaq government drafted the Listuguj Mi'gmaq First Nation Law on Fisheries and Fishing.

We are celebrating this act of self-government. Today, the Restigouche River is known as one of the best-managed salmon rivers in the country. This demonstrates that it is possible for the Canadian and first nations governments to develop and maintain reciprocal, non-violent relationships that are mutually beneficial.

Oral Questions

[English]

BETTY FOX

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today we celebrate a life well lived, struck by grief yet anchored by hope.

Betty Fox, the wife of Rolly, mother of Fred, Darrell, Judy and Terry, passed away on Friday morning. We feel grief because no parent should outlive his or her child, yet hope because she was inspired by a fierce determination to keep Terry's cause, a cure for cancer, ever present in the psyche of Canadians and to keep Terry alive in her heart. It is what a parent's love does.

Betty Fox's great legacy was the passionate commitment to continue Terry's dream, his Marathon of Hope, as only she could. She was a reluctant champion, but understood the importance of her role when she was thrust into that extraordinary circumstance.

Yet this devoted, determined, compelling woman also gave us hope, our marathon of hope. She had a generosity of spirit and it was clear that she knew her mind when it came to Terry's legacy. Today, around the world, we run for Terry and we will always remember the mom who in every way kept his dream alive.

Betty made us very proud. She did her job. Her marathon is over. Now it is our turn.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have learned that the Prime Minister's staff, both in the Privy Council Office and the Prime Minister's Office, are not complying with Treasury Board rules regarding hospitality expenses.

The rules require that expenses be authorized in advance and neither the PMO nor the PCO are following the rules. The Prime Minister and his government like to make a big fuss about the importance of law and order.

How is it that the Prime Minister believes he is above the law when it comes to his own expenses?

[English]

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has cut spending on hospitality by more than 30% over and above the previous government's record.

To be clear, measures were put in place some time ago to ensure that any necessary spending on coffee or on limited hospitality was in fact approved beforehand.

Oral Questions

• (1420)

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as is the case with his Treasury Board president who broke all the rules, the Prime Minister does not seem to understand that if he is going to preach restraint, he had better lead by example.

A trip with friends and family to a hockey game in Boston, \$100,000. Watching the government avoid the question, priceless.

Why is it that the Prime Minister has just written to his ministers to require them to follow the rules and tighten their budgets when his office is breaking those very rules and his own budget is completely out of control?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Again, Mr. Speaker, I am not exactly sure what the hon. member is going on about.

Again, it is our government that has cut spending on hospitality by some 30%. We have in fact improved on the approval process.

Just because we are reducing hospitality spending does not make us inhospitable. We are such warm people over here.

* * *

[Translation]

CANADA POST

Mr. Thomas Mulcair (Outremont, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government claims to be acting in good faith. Let us see. Our collective bargaining system is based on good faith. In the case of Canada Post, it was the government itself, through a crown corporation, that locked out Canada Post employees. This same government is now turning around, pointing at the situation it created, and saying that it must put an end to the lockout it created by introducing a special law to break workers' rights.

Is that acting in good faith?

[English]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada Post and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers have had an ample amount of time to discuss their issues at a bargaining table and, indeed, to use the collective bargaining process.

We have been part of that, too. What we have been doing is facilitating, either through conciliation or mediation, or indeed through my trying to bring the parties to focus their attention on the issues, because, at the end of the day, the work stoppage affects all Canadians, small businesses and charities, and that is what needs to be addressed.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government is threatening back to work legislation for Canada Post workers.

However, the limited rolling strike is not what disrupted Canada's mail services. It was the lockout of 9,000 mail carriers by Canada Post. At stake are pensions, health and safety conditions, and fair wages for the next generation of Canadian workers.

Why is the government interfering in these negotiations and trampling on free collective bargaining?

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as we stated before, the parties to the dispute have been unable to attain a collective bargaining agreement thus far.

That is why the Canadian government is proposing to introduce back to work legislation. That is exactly what I will do today at 3 o'clock.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that is going to take rights away from workers.

[Translation]

Canada Post employees took legitimate measures to assert their rights. The employees decided to stand up for their rights, but they also decided to continue serving the population. The employer decided otherwise. Canada Post decided that it did not care about the Canadian people or the service it is supposed to provide.

Why not denounce the employer's position? Why is the government going to reward this attitude with back-to-work legislation?

[English]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is both parties at the table who are negotiating and who have been unable to attain an agreement.

That is why we are acting on behalf of Canadians, on behalf of small businesses, on behalf of charities, who are being affected by this work stoppage across the country. As I said, that is exactly why we will be introducing back to work legislation today.

* * *

PENSIONS

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one of the things the minister just said was that she was trying to get the parties to focus on the issues.

It is very clear that one of the key issues is that workers who used to be able to rely on a defined benefit plan that would provide them with a degree of security are no longer able to rely on that security with respect to major employers in the country. This is a pattern that has been growing. The fact remains that the defined benefit provision has been one of the main pillars of the Canadian pension system.

What is the government doing to make sure that this pillar does not simply crumble?

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the context of the negotiations at the table, the parties have been able to narrowly define three or four issues that are in contention. Unfortunately, they have not been able to find a process or even come to an agreement themselves on those three issues. I encourage the parties to find their own way, find a process and come to an agreement. But if they cannot, today at three o'clock, we will be tabling back to work legislation.

Oral Questions

●(1425)

[Translation]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I did not hear an answer to my question about pensions. This issue affects not just the workers at Canada Post, but all workers in the country. It is evident that there will be more strikes this year and next if we do not find a solution that provides more security for Canadian workers.

[English]

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, it is this party that actually recognized the inconsistency with retirement income in this country.

We are working with our partners, the provinces and the territories. Over 63% of Canadians do not have either a defined benefit or a defined contribution plan. We are making sure that it is equal and fair for all Canadians.

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have failed again to seriously deal with the pension crisis facing Canada.

Last week, all the finance minister could come up with was to tout his plagiarized version of Australia's experiment with pooled retirement pension plans. But Australia has found out already that its plan only resulted in higher fees and program costs and did not help the average Australian.

When is the government going to learn from the mistakes of others and start working to really help Canadians prepare for retirement?

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the only mistake we will not follow is that of the Liberal government that chose to do nothing about this. This situation did not just happen overnight. This has taken years to build.

We have reduced taxes for seniors by \$2 billion. That is an important benefit for them, but it is not all that they need. They need assistance in saving for their own retirement. That is what we are putting together in conjunction with the provinces. We will be bringing that idea forward to the House very soon, a shared plan with our partners in the provinces.

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*[Translation]***MORTGAGE INSURANCE**

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, just before the recession, this government rolled out the red carpet for American companies that specialize in mortgage insurance. They invited the very companies responsible for the crash in the United States' housing market. With Bill C-3, the government is planning to take this risky policy even further.

Why should taxpayers have to assume the risks run by these American companies?

[English]

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I really do not know where the hon. member gets her theoretical facts.

What has happened in Canada is that we have had a solid housing market. We have not had the kinds of difficulties, thank goodness, that the United States, Ireland and other countries have had.

Why is that so? It is because we have a well run system, because we have mortgages with recourse, because we reduced amortization periods. It is because we watch the system and when intervention is necessary, we intervene, as we have done three times in the last three years.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation was doing a very good job of providing mortgage insurance, and even returned a profit to Canadians. Yet the government opened the door to U.S. insurers, then pushed to relax the rules so these insurers could offer riskier mortgages, which they did. They encouraged people to sign on to mortgages they could not afford.

Why is the government asking taxpayers to risk billions of dollars for these private companies when CMHC is a much more secure, more stable way of helping homebuyers? Why is that?

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thought the question was actually about the housing record. It appears that the member is just concerned that private enterprise could have anything to do with business in Canada.

We actually believe in private enterprise. We do not believe the public should take 100% of the risk in insured mortgages in Canada.

The other thing the hon. member might want to think about is that it is important to have competition in that sector, as it is in every other sector in our economy. Everybody in that sector, public or private, plays by the same rules, and we set the rules.

* * *

*[Translation]***THE SENATE**

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has been promising for years to reform the Senate but he broke his promise to have an elected Senate and to limit senators' terms. His record is clear. Like the previous governments he has so often criticized, he appointed his friends to the upper chamber. How ironic that those he appointed no longer want to give up their privileges.

If the government's credibility is in doubt within its own caucus, how can it expect to have the support of this House?

Oral Questions

●(1430)

[English]

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we believe that the Senate must change in order to reach its full potential as an accountable and democratic institution. The effectiveness and legitimacy of the Senate suffers because senators do not have a democratic mandate from Canadians and can serve terms as long as 45 years.

Our government received a strong mandate. We are committed to acting quickly on reforming the Senate, so that it better reflects the values of Canada and Canadians in the 21st century.

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is time the government was clear with Canadians about the Prime Minister's Senate reform plans. We all know that no matter what we do, the changes will be complicated. Yet, the government's message is all over the map. Heck, the Prime Minister cannot even get his own senators on side with his plans.

My question is very simple. Why will the government not just support a straight-up referendum, asking Canadians, do they support abolishing the Senate, yes or no?

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government received a strong mandate to reform the Senate and implement our plan to make it more accountable. We believe Senate reform is the best option to address Canadians' concerns about senators serving terms up to 45 years without a democratic mandate. We are committed to reforming the Senate, so that it better reflects the values of Canada and Canadians in the 21st century.

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*[Translation]***GOVERNMENT SPENDING**

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it has been almost two weeks now since the Auditor General criticized the former industry minister's misuse and waste of public funds to benefit his friends. Yet the former minister has still not apologized and has not provided details on the projects that were chosen. This is becoming a habit. He also has not provided details on his plan for budget cuts. We have found out about some of them: the 40% cuts at the Canada Mortgage and Housing corporation, the 20% cuts at Environment Canada and the millions of dollars in cuts at the Canada Revenue Agency.

When will the minister start acting like a real minister?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to describe some of these projects and what was done. There is an airport in North Bay. The government helped resurface the runway so that planes could land on it.

There is a provincial highway in that part of rural Ontario that was repaved. That is important. A community centre was also built. It is now available for the benefit of the people in that municipality, and I could go on.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the 2011-12 main estimates will soon be examined in parliamentary committee. The President of the Treasury Board has agreed to testify, but only for one hour. But we think that it must have taken much more than an hour to set up his \$50 million plan for the G8 summit to benefit his friends.

Could the minister himself, or his foreign affairs critic, explain why we are allowed only one hour to discuss the management of \$250 billion?

[English]

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a question for me that has to do with my portfolio. I want to state to the House that I am looking forward to going to the government operations committee to defend our estimates. We have a strong mandate from the people of Canada to move ahead with the right kind of strategy, the right kind of agenda for Canada and Canadians, and we are damn proud of it.

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ETHICS

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was reading the 2011 ethical guide for cabinet ministers and I notice the government rewrote it to say that ministers must obey the law. I find it astonishing that ministers must be told that "Thou shall not collude nor conspire to create a coven of kleptocracy in Canada".

The minister blew through \$50 million without documentation. Did the Conservatives have to rewrite the rules so none of the other ministers were as cavalier with the public trust?

●(1435)

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there was another change in the guide that jumped out at me. Civil servants are now told that even if the minister compels them, they are obliged to follow the rules. Was this why the member for Muskoka shut out the bureaucrats? How else could he have passed himself off as the Daddy Warbucks of cottage country?

How else could he have gotten the three amigos, the mayor, the hotel manager and the minister, to divvy up \$50 million on outhouses, picnic tables and bike racks without documentation? How else could he have gotten away with it?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, try as the member might, he is not the member for Winnipeg North Centre.

An hon. member: Never will be.

Hon. John Baird: And never will be. That is the real deal. I like the member for Winnipeg North Centre, and he is not the member for Winnipeg North Centre.

I am pleased to confirm to the House and to my friend opposite that none of the three individuals he mentioned approved any of the 32 projects.

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G20 SUMMIT

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government hopes that if it keeps piling on the paperwork, Toronto businesses will eventually forget about seeking G20 compensation and just quietly go away. Toronto businesses inside and around the G20 zone suffered millions in damages and they are not going away. It has now been a year without compensation and these folks are still suffering.

The minister claimed he is ready to move forward and expedite this, but after a year the question is, when?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I share the member opposite's concern. Many small businesses were really affected due to the security issues surrounding the holding of the summit in Toronto.

The member opposite raised this question two weeks ago and then again last week. I asked him if there were any specific businesses that I could specifically look into on his behalf. I am very prepared to do that. I think he and my colleague, our friend from Parkdale—High Park, have raised a legitimate concern about the adequacy of the funding and whether the rules are too strict, and I am certainly prepared to review that.

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PRIVY COUNCIL OFFICE

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we know the government's waste fighter-in-chief sprayed \$50 million around his riding with no oversight and no paperwork. Now we learn that the department of the Prime Minister himself has been breaking the rules on hospitality expenses.

So if the President of the Treasury Board is the fox guarding the taxpayers' chicken coop and if the boss of the fox is himself breaking the rules as well, how can Canadians possibly believe that this crew will cut government fat fairly and competently?

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, our government has cut spending on hospitality by more than 30% over the government that the member served in. To be clear, we put measures in place. In fact, they were put in place some time ago to make sure that any necessary spending on coffee or limited hospitality was approved beforehand.

We respect taxpayers' dollars on this side of the House, and we spend each and every dollar with due care.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

HIGHWAY INFRASTRUCTURE

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government is staying silent on the messy issue of Montreal's south shore bridges.

The Mercier Bridge is blocked off, when it is not falling to pieces, much like the Champlain Bridge. People are having a heck of a time getting to work, and we are going to tell them an emergency committee needs to be struck because no one is talking. Montreal is being taken hostage by a lack of transparency, leadership and communication.

What is the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities doing for Montreal? Why is he not making the Champlain Bridge studies public? What does he have to hide?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his interest in helping us improve the highway network in the greater Montreal area.

As always, respecting our partners' jurisdictions is immensely important for our government, whether our partners are at the municipal level, or at the provincial level, as is the case for provincial highways. The Quebec government and the federal government each own 50% of the Mercier Bridge. I will be pleased to continue working with my colleague to improve things for the people of Montreal.

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[English]

DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for the second year in a row massive flooding is damaging Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Another five inches of rain fell this past weekend in places like Yellow Grass, Radville, Weyburn, Estevan and Roche Percee. Infrastructure has again been eroded and millions of acres of farmland will not get seeded again. The western premiers want a better national response to such disasters.

Could premiers Wall and Selinger be assured today that the federal government would support a new national disaster strategy with greater federal compensation and more investment in prevention in the first place?

● (1440)

Ms. Candice Hooppner (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we do share concerns with the provinces that are experiencing flooding. Our government is committed to helping the provinces, whether it be Manitoba, Saskatchewan, or Quebec, to help mitigate the disaster and afterward. We are committed to supporting all provinces with any flooding situation.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, over the past two years, this government has spent \$1 million trying to sell the international community on an idea that no one wants to buy: carbon capture and storage. Our partners know that this technology is inadequate.

How can the minister justify spending \$1 million on trying to sell this unproven technology? Does he not realize that he is only damaging our international reputation even further?

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would refer my colleague to the case of Saskatchewan where, after a wise investment of \$242 million and a pilot project on carbon capture, the Government of Saskatchewan found that, in fact, the technology does work and announced the investment of \$1 billion into a carbon capture project.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we know what works and the government keeps promising energy efficiency, but it is failing to deliver. The government claimed that there were greenhouse gas reductions through the eco-energy retrofit program and the renewables program, but it is letting these programs lapse. Instead of increasing investment in renewable energy, the government spent \$1 million lobbying the U.S.

Why will the minister not wake up to the fact that Canada needs real investment in technologies that work and not more investment in the lobbying industry?

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with regard to our plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and hit our 2020 targets, we are on course and proceeding in that direction.

With regard to communications with Washington, that is a matter for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to communicate, where needed, with those who are under-informed or misinformed.

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ASBESTOS

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Rotterdam convention meeting on hazardous material starts today in Geneva.

In 2006 and 2008, the government blocked chrysotile asbestos from being added to the list against Health Canada's recommendations. Now the eyes of the world are back on the government to see if Canada will finally do the right thing.

I have a simple question. Will the government allow chrysotile asbestos to be added to the Rotterdam convention, yes or no?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our position at Rotterdam will be the same as in Canada. For over 30 years the Government of Canada has promoted the safe and controlled use of chrysotile, both domestically and internationally. All scientific reviews clearly confirm that chrysotile fibres can be used safely under controlled conditions.

[Translation]

Mr. Romeo Saganash (Abitibi—Baie-James—Nunavik—Eeyou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member does not seem to understand that the Rotterdam Convention specifies that countries must ensure that hazardous material is handled safely. By opposing this classification, the Conservatives are putting the lives of many workers around the world in danger. Even former Conservative minister Chuck Strahl has denounced this position. He had the courage to take a stand.

Will the current Conservative members do the same and agree that asbestos should be classified as a hazardous material?

● (1445)

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Chrysotile Institute is mandated by the federal government, the Government of Quebec and chrysotile workers' unions to promote the safe and controlled use of chrysotile here in Canada and internationally.

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[English]

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the weekend, Team Canada travelled to Athens, Greece, where it will showcase the exceptional talent of our athletes and coaches at the Special Olympics World Summer Games.

I would like to ask the Minister of State for Sport what the government is doing to support our Special Olympics athletes as they proudly represent us abroad?

Hon. Bal Gosal (Minister of State (Sport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, since this is my first time to rise in the House, I would like to thank the citizens of Bramalea—Gore—Malton for electing me as their representative in Ottawa.

As we know, Canada is home to some of the greatest athletes in the world. Last week, Mr. Flaherty and I had the opportunity to send Team Canada on its journey of athletic excellence.

Our government is proud to assist Special Olympics Canada by including regional funding in budget 2011 to provide opportunities for Canadian athletes with intellectual disabilities.

This government congratulates Team Canada and wishes it great success at the World Summer Games.

The Speaker: Order, please. I would remind the hon. minister not to use proper names, but ridings or titles.

The hon. member for Hull—Aylmer.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us get the facts straight: the National Research Council of Canada is the Government of Canada's premier organization for research and development. Yet we have learned that the Conservatives were going to cut the NRC's budget by 20%. The government's fiscal dogmatism is ruining the future of research in Canada.

Does this government realize that with this type of policy, it is only encouraging a brain drain toward countries with a vision for the future?

[English]

Mr. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government's number one priority is the economy. That is why we have increased our investments in the NRC by 17% to support more research, help businesses grow, and deliver results for Canadians.

On top of that, we provided temporary two-year stimulus funding for the NRC under the economic action plan. That ended on March 31.

[Translation]

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of State for Science and Technology is a creationist. Would that not explain the cuts to the National Research Council of Canada?

This decision falls under the same category as the abolition of the long form census: less research, less data, less information, less accountability to the public.

What does this government have against truth and knowledge?

[English]

Mr. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I answered the question regarding the National Research Council.

With regard to the census, which the hon. member brings up, the government decided to bring in a different regime that does not threaten Canadians with jail time and fines simply because they do not want to tell the government what their religion is, or how many bedrooms they have in their house, or how much time they spend with their kids. Canadians find that, obviously, reasonable. We just fought an election and Canadians gave this government a strong mandate to continue in the direction we are going.

* * *

[Translation]

HOME OWNERSHIP

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last week, the Governor of the Bank of Canada, Mark Carney, said that housing is severely unaffordable for most households in large Canadian cities. The mortgage on the average home eats up 43% of household income before taxes.

How can families meet their needs without going into debt when they have to spend so much money just to pay their mortgage? How

far does this stranglehold have to go before the government finally decides to take action?

[English]

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure members that is not what the Governor of the Bank of Canada said last week. What the governor of the bank indicated is that he had some concern in some sectors of the economy, particularly in the Vancouver condo market, with respect to some evidence of excessive prices, and that is so.

However, if we look at the Canadian housing market across the board in Canada, there is comfort to be taken. We took another step this year to reduce amortization periods and to require higher down payments. It is working. We are seeing some moderation in the housing market in Canada. That is desirable, but homeowners should bear in mind that interest rates have nowhere to go but up and they should consider that as they plan for the future.

● (1450)

[Translation]

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government is once again telling people to fend for themselves. Mr. Carney said that home owners are even more vulnerable in today's crises than they were 10 years ago. Today, people either cannot afford to buy a house or they are at risk of losing the one they have.

Does the government understand that part of its role is to ensure that Canadians have access to safe and affordable housing?

[English]

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member is looking for a housing crisis, she should look south of the border.

We do not wish that on our neighbours in the United States, but the reality is that their housing crisis continues. There is a danger of a prolonged housing crisis in the United States.

That is not so in Canada and that is because we regulate, we supervise, we monitor, and we have fiscal responsibility in terms of the housing sector in Canada, a very different place.

* * *

[Translation]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the more time goes by, the longer Henk Tepper, a New Brunswick farmer, remains imprisoned in Lebanon as a result of a commercial dispute in Algeria.

The more time goes by, the longer the Conservative ministers remain guilty of failing to take action to help Mr. Tepper. Yesterday was Father's Day, but no one in Mr. Tepper's family was able to see him.

When will the Minister of Foreign Affairs finally take action and enter into direct contact with the Lebanese minister to bring Mr. Tepper home to Canada?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Hon. Diane Ablonczy (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas and Consular Affairs), CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are very concerned about this case and for Mr. Tepper's family here in Canada. We know it is a very difficult time for them.

Consular officials in Lebanon have been actively providing consular support and assistance to Mr. Tepper and his family since his arrest, including regular visits to ensure his well-being and health.

Officials will continue to engage with senior Lebanese officials on this case.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, yesterday was Father's Day, but Henk Tepper, a New Brunswick potato farmer, could not see his kids because he has been in a Lebanese prison for almost three months as a result of a commercial dispute in Algeria.

Mr. Tepper's family is not interested in an international law lecture from the minister. They want the government to take its solemn responsibility to do something, protect its citizens and intervene now to bring Mr. Tepper home to Canada.

The foreign affairs minister will be in the region in the next few days. Why does he not stop in Lebanon and bring Mr. Tepper home to Canada in time for his daughter's graduation from high school next weekend?

Hon. Diane Ablonczy (Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas and Consular Affairs), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the member that Mr. Tepper and his family have been actively supported with consular assistance during the time since his arrest.

There are regular visits, regular contact. I can assure the member that we will continue to liaise with officials in Lebanon on this case.

* * *

CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it made sense, in a way, when I learned last week that the Minister of Agriculture is actually an ostrich farmer because he surely has his head in the sand when it comes to the Canadian Wheat Board.

He has displayed a wilful blindness to any reason, or logic, or democracy, or even economics when it comes to his irrational, ideological crusade to legislate out of business the largest and most successful grain marketing company in the world.

If the government is so determined to destroy this great Canadian institution, where is the business case? Where is the cost benefit analysis? Where is the impact study? Where is the liability assessment?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will try to give the member opposite some reason and logic and that is that our government has always supported farmers and farmers support us because of that.

They have given us a strong mandate. They want us to fulfill our commitments. One of those commitments was to give western

Canadian farmers the same marketing choice that the rest of the farmers across Canada have and we will do that.

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have had phone calls from prairie grain producers who admit they voted for Conservatives but who are furious that they are going to dismantle the Canadian Wheat Board.

The grain producers told me they were always led to understand that the minister would allow them to have a vote, as the legislation says, on the future of how they want to market their grain.

If the government wants to give prairie farmers more choice in how they get to market their grain, why will it not let them have the democratic vote that is statutorily theirs in the legislation?

● (1455)

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite actually did say something about monopolies. He said they have a monopoly and a monopoly has to be regulated or reined in, or it cannot be allowed to exist. Is that not the socialist heartbeat: regulate, rein in, or obliterate?

We have a better way and that is to give freedom to western Canadian farmers, freedom to make their own decisions, freedom to take advantage of opportunities, freedom to do well and freedom to market their own products.

* * *

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today the WTO released the Canadian trade policy review. The report praises Canada's strong economic performance during the global recession and commends Canada's aggressive pro-trade plan.

According to the report, Canada's considerably expanded free trade agreement agenda marks a departure with its past practice. We all know the NDP is firmly and ideologically opposed to free trade as we heard during its convention. Despite this opposition, could the minister explain why we will continue aggressively pursuing a free trade agenda?

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Miramichi for that excellent question and also for her hard work on the trade file.

Unlike the NDP, we recognize that one in five Canadian jobs is directly or indirectly related to trade and to exports. In order to protect and strengthen the financial security of hard-working Canadians, we will continue to pursue a low-tax free trade plan because we know it will create jobs. Canadians understand that this is a kitchen-table issue and we are pleased the World Trade Organization has acknowledged the merits of our job-creating pro-trade plan.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, finally aboriginal people in Canada have the right to challenge discriminatory treatment under the Canadian Human Rights Act. However, the national chief has made it clear that first nations lack the capacity and resources to effectively implement those changes. The Canadian Human Rights Commission itself has said the government's approach could perpetuate discrimination instead of ending it.

When will the government end the obstruction and provide the resources so 100% of aboriginal peoples can achieve full equality?

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is Aboriginal Awareness Week and that is something I would encourage all members to participate in. There are many activities going on in the capital region and across the country.

I thank the member for recognizing that the Canadian Human Rights Act now applies to on-reserve first nations as of Saturday, a very important event, something we can celebrate. We believe that first nation governments will accommodate themselves to this very readily.

* * *

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canada has been waiting for 28 CH-148 Cyclone helicopters since 2004. These delays have cost Canada \$6.2 billion. The Minister of National Defence described the agreement for the Sikorsky helicopters as one of the worst examples of military procurement, but he did not say that Sikorsky still owes penalties for the delays.

While Canadian families are tightening their belts, how can the government allow large military companies to take advantage of us by failing to collect the money we are owed?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when we sign a contract with a military supplier, we expect its obligations under the contract to be met. The first interim maritime helicopter has arrived at 12 Wing Shearwater to support training of Canadian Forces air crew and technicians for the maritime helicopter project. It is important to know that Sikorsky has confirmed that it will deliver the 28 fully compliant maritime helicopters on schedule starting in June of this year.

Oral Questions

BANK OF CANADA

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, because this is the first time for me to rise in the House, I would like to take a moment to thank the voters of Prince George—Peace River for allowing me the honour to represent them.

I understand today the Minister of Finance took part in the unveiling of a new banknote series at the Bank of Canada. Could the Minister of Finance please rise in the House today and speak to the importance of these new notes?

● (1500)

Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I welcome the hon. member for Prince George—Peace River to the House. He certainly has big boots to fill, given the member who preceded him.

There are new and technically innovative banknotes. They were introduced today by the Bank of Canada. Canadians will see their story in the new banknotes. Our spirit of innovation and our achievements at home, around the world and even in space. In particular, the \$100 note unveiled today focuses on Canadian innovations in medicine, and the \$50 note features the Coast Guard ship, *Amundsen*, reflecting Canada's leading role in Arctic research.

* * *

PUBLIC WORKS AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES CANADA

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, could the Minister of Public Works and Government Services confirm the news just published by the *Globe and Mail*, which states:

Public Works managers informed their employees Monday the department will shed about 700 jobs over the coming three years...include the elimination of 92 auditors.

The cuts to auditing staff at Public Works come just as the department is in the midst of overseeing a \$35-billion wave of military purchases...that carries political implications as Canada's regions battle over the contracts.

Is it true?

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as part of our continuous efforts to become more efficient and more effective, Public Works has achieved the strategic review target set out by Treasury Board. This was achieved with the oversight of former national security adviser, Margaret Bloodworth, and the former auditor general, Denis Desautels.

These savings will provide the room to continue paying down debt and investing in the priorities of Canadians, including lowering taxes for families.

Routine Proceedings

Retirement and attrition will provide the public service with the flexibility to manage these decisions without substantial job losses.

* * *

[Translation]

LABOUR RELATIONS

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, by threatening to pass special legislation, the Conservatives are causing harm to postal workers by preventing an agreement negotiated in good faith. Knowing that the government will table special legislation as soon as a strike is declared, the employer has no interest in considering employees' legitimate demands. On the contrary, the employer is attempting to have the special legislation tabled sooner by imposing a lockout.

Is this not the Minister of Labour's real strategy, to rush to the assistance of employers who take a hard line as soon as the strike they themselves provoked is called?

[English]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at 12:15 this afternoon, I sat in on a conference call with both the president of the union and the president of Canada Post urging them both equally, to find a way through this impasse, find a process that works for them, to conclude their collective bargaining and come to an agreement. At this point in time it is harming nobody but the Canadian public, businesses and charities. That is why, in a few short minutes, we will be introducing back to work legislation.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during question period, I made reference to my friend as the member from Winnipeg North Centre. I should have said the member from Winnipeg Centre. I apologize to the House.

The Speaker: I am sure the House appreciates that.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[English]

TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to the Canadian Transportation Accident Investigation and Safety Board Act, section 13(3)(b), I have the honour to table in the House, in both official languages, the 2010-11 annual report to Parliament of the Transportation Safety Board.

* * *

RESTORING MAIL DELIVERY FOR CANADIANS ACT

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Labour, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-6, An Act to provide for the resumption and continuation of postal services.

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

• (1505)

[Translation]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

FINANCE

Mr. James Rajotte (Edmonton—Leduc, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the first report of the Standing Committee on Finance on Bill C-3, An Act to implement certain provisions of the 2011 budget as updated on June 6, 2011.

[English]

The committee has studied the bill and has decided to report the bill back to the House without amendments.

* * *

POVERTY ELIMINATION ACT

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-233, An Act to eliminate poverty in Canada.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I will begin by acknowledging the member for Burnaby—New Westminster for seconding this important bill.

I especially pay tribute to Tony Martin, the former member for Sault Ste. Marie, who originally introduced his Bill C-545 in the last Parliament back in June 2010. I will quote his words because he said it all. When he introduced the bill he said:

The purpose of this bill is to impose on the federal government the obligation to eliminate poverty and promote social inclusion by establishing and implementing a strategy for poverty elimination in consultation with the provincial, territorial, municipal and aboriginal governments and with civil society organizations.

This bill is an opportunity for real nation building where no one gets left behind, to build healthy communities and strong economies by taking advantage of the momentum created by the work being done at the human resources and social development standing committee and by the Dignity for All campaign.

I want to acknowledge all of the poverty reduction groups that have worked so hard on developing this bill and all of the good work done on it by people from coast to coast to coast.

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

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE ACT

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-234, An Act to amend the Employment Insurance Act (maximum — special benefits).

Routine Proceedings

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present this bill, which would extend the maximum period for which employment insurance benefits for serious illness may be paid from 15 to 50 weeks.

This bill was introduced in previous Parliaments, but has never been passed at third reading. It is important to amend this 40-year-old measure. The amendment to paragraph 12(3)(c) of the act would allow people with serious illnesses to receive more than 15 weeks of benefits, as is currently the case. Marie-Hélène Dubé, who was behind a petition presented in the House in this regard, said:

A society that supports the sick during a critical time in their lives is a healthy society that helps these people to recover and reintegrate into society by avoiding the trap of personal and social poverty.

A few weeks of benefits can make all the difference. In order to give everyone an equal opportunity to overcome illness and recover, it is of the utmost importance that we extend the sickness benefit period so that everyone can obtain decent and fair compensation.

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

* * *

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I move:

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the Member for London—Fanshawe, all questions necessary to dispose of the motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to Tuesday, June 21, 2011, at the expiry of Government Orders provided that, notwithstanding any Standing Orders or usual practice of the House, if a recorded division is requested on any motion to dispose of the remaining stages of Bill C-3, An Act to implement certain provisions of the 2011 budget as updated on June 6, 2011, it shall stand deferred immediately following those divisions.

● (1510)

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

PETITIONS**DARFUR**

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure of tabling two petitions. The first is from over 1,000 Canadians, including many in my constituency.

[Translation]

The petitioners are asking the Government of Canada to put an end to the humanitarian catastrophe in Darfur. Voters point out that, since 2003, more than 400,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million have been displaced. They are asking the Government of Canada to work with the international community and put an end to these atrocities.

[English]

This is particularly true now. As we move to the countdown for the establishment of the independent state of southern Sudan, atrocities have broken out again in Darfur.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from the Grandmothers for Gilad Shalit, who have been concerned as we approach the fifth anniversary of his illegal abduction and imprisonment since June 2006 where he has been held in complete isolation and denied access to any rights afforded him under international law. No visitations by individuals, doctors, the International Red Cross Society or by anyone in his family have been permitted by his Hamas captors.

Accordingly, the petitioners call upon the Government of Canada to insist that the Red Cross, the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies uphold the applicable standards of international humanitarian law, which would include, at a minimum, proof of life, a visit to the captured soldier and communication between him and his family as a bare minimum, while using its good offices bilaterally and internationally to secure his release and return.

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of my former colleague, Luc Malo, I am presenting today a petition signed by 350 grade six students from 15 classes in six Sainte-Julie schools, who want their generation and the ones to follow to be assured of living in an environment where the air, water and soil will be certified as safe.

I would like to congratulate Antoine Vézina, a grade six student at Du Moulin school. Thanks to his initiative, these young petitioners are asking the government to take the necessary measures to ensure that companies and factories drastically reduce their toxic emissions into the air, water and soil.

I will take this opportunity to thank Diane Bernier, spiritual life and community involvement leader at the Patriotes school board, who helped the children with this initiative.

* * *

[English]

QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask that all questions be allowed to stand?

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

*Business of Supply***REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE**

CANADIAN WHEAT BOARD

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today seeking your leave to move the adjournment of the House to debate the issue outlined in the application presented to you this morning, about which I will now speak. It is a matter that demands urgent attention by the minister responsible for the Canadian Wheat Board.

The minister has consistently called for the dissolution of the Canadian Wheat Board. We have learned through his answers in question period that the minister will, in the next session of Parliament, attempt to do so without holding a plebiscite of the wheat board membership, which is a sound democratic right bestowed on western wheat and barley farmers through section 47.1 of the Canadian Wheat Board Act.

The wheat board is a fundamentally important institution to many tens of thousands of western farmers and their families, whose livelihoods are protected by its crucial work. They deserve to have the act followed and to have their opinions respected in a democratic vote with a clear question, whatever the outcome.

This request for an emergency debate needs to be granted because Canadians, through their representatives, have a right to know why the minister plans to violate section 47.1 of the act, and to know how he will restructure the wheat board if in fact he does not obey section 47.1 and to know how his restructuring will be implemented.

Standing Order 52 explains that the House can adjourn to hear an emergency debate if the Speaker, in his discretion, concludes that the issue of the debate is: (a) within the scope of the government's administrative responsibilities and within the scope of ministerial action; (b) will not be brought before the House in reasonable time by other means; and (c) relates to a matter of genuine emergency requiring immediate and urgent consideration.

It is clear that the conditions set out in (a) above are met, because section 47.1 of the act makes it clear that the wheat board falls not only within the administrative responsibilities of the government but also that any action dealing with the wheat board's mandate will be determined by the minister and it is, therefore, within his scope.

This matter is a genuine emergency requiring immediate consideration as set out in (c) above for the very reason that causes this issue to comply with (b) above.

The minister has telegraphed his intentions to change the mandate of the wheat board, but he has not told Canadians how he is planning to do so and he has therefore comprised the ability of the wheat board to function effectively and has created confusion, uncertainty and alarm among western Canadian grain producers.

It is imperative that this debate be held today, because there is no reasonable expectation that this issue will be brought before the House in a reasonable time or prior to the House's summer recess.

There is also no expectation that the required vote set out in section 47.1(b) of the act will occur within a reasonable time before the minister's legislation is brought forward in the fall, if at all.

The debate I propose will focus on clearly determining if the minister is willing to abide by section 47.1 of the act. If he will not

abide by it, we will seek to determine for western farmers how he plans to restructure the wheat board and how the restructuring will be implemented.

I respectfully submit, therefore, that the issues are within the scope of the government's administrative responsibilities, will not be brought before the House in a reasonable time by other means, and relate to a matter of genuine urgency requiring immediate attention.

It is with this in mind that I appeal to you to hold an emergency debate to determine if the minister will skirt section 47.1 of the act, and to determine how the board will change under the minister's undisclosed legislation.

● (1515)

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. No doubt it is of concern to him and some of his colleagues. I find, however, that it does not meet the tests for an emergency debate and, therefore, I would decline the request at this time.

The hon. member for Winnipeg North is rising on a point of order?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yes, Mr. Speaker, with all due respect, I wonder if it would be possible to ask for unanimous consent of the House to allow a debate of this nature to occur, given the very impact on western Canada. Could we canvas the House to see if there would be support for that?

The Speaker: I am not sure what kind of unanimous consent the member is seeking. Is to have some kind of debate later today?

I do not get the sense there is consensus on that, so we will move on to orders of the day.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—SENIORS' POVERTY

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: When question period started, the hon. member for Peace River had seven minutes left to conclude his remarks.

Mr. Chris Warkentin (Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have had the opportunity to speak many times in the House since I was re-elected, but now while you were in the chair. Therefore, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election as Speaker in the House. Already we are finding that we made the right choice, that in fact you are doing an excellent job as Speaker, and we look forward to your responsibilities being carried out over the next four years and will be well served.

Business of Supply

Before question period, I was in the middle of my speech on the government's response to the issue of seniors' poverty in this country. I was undertaking to reveal some facts. In this debate different stories have been brought to the floor, but it is important for us as legislators to always look back to the facts. It is important that we review those facts, and one of them is that we live in a country that has one of the lowest rates of seniors' poverty in the world.

Currently, 5.8% of seniors live under the poverty line. We obviously do not want any seniors under the poverty line, but we have to recognize that this is one of the lowest rates in the world, and one of the lowest rates in Canadian history as well.

If we look back over the last number of years to 2003, the rate was higher at 6.8%. If we look even further back to 1999, the rate of senior poverty was nearly 8%. At 5.8% we know that we are making some significant improvements. Many of the initiatives that our government has brought forward in the last budget, as well as many of the things we have promised, will only improve that reality.

It is also important to reflect upon the fact that the GIS increase our government is proposing in the budget is the single largest increase Canadian seniors will have seen in the last 25 years. My opposition colleagues today have often suggested that if only they were in power, they would do things differently. However, under the Liberal government, even when it brought forward an NDP budget, this provision was not included and was not on its radar screen at all. It was 25 years ago that we last saw an increase of this magnitude. I think it is important for us to reflect on those facts.

Just before question period, I also remarked on the fact that our government had undertaken a whole host of different initiatives to bring tax relief to Canadian senior citizens. As a matter of fact, with the provisions that our government has brought forward since 2006, over 85,000 senior citizens are completely off the tax rolls. This means that 85,000 seniors who were paying federal income tax in 2005 and 2006 no longer pay it to the federal government at all. This obviously is a significant change and why the rate of poverty among senior citizens continues to drop.

Our government has done a whole host of other things that do not necessarily have to do with tax relief. In addition to the things we have done on the tax side, there is a whole host of other things we have done to continue focusing on senior citizens. Any time we make a change in any other department, we have initiatives that always take into consideration how they will impact senior citizens.

That is why our government and the Prime Minister appointed a minister of state for seniors. I want to acknowledge that we have an exceptional Minister of State for Seniors today, but this post has been held by two other extremely competent and remarkable female cabinet ministers since it was created. I want to thank the members who held this position previously because, due to their work, seniors' issues continue to be brought to the forefront at the cabinet table.

We have also created the National Seniors Council to advise the government on all things related to the well-being of senior citizens.

In addition, we have raised the income earned exemption under the guaranteed income supplement from \$500 to \$3,500. This is benefiting over 1.6 million seniors across this country.

● (1520)

We have also introduced an automatic renewal of the guaranteed income supplement, so that eligible seniors who file a tax return no longer need to reapply for this benefit year after year. This is one of our government's initiatives to ensure that senior citizens do not fall through the cracks and will not lose the GIS benefit if they do not produce the paperwork on time. Our government has worked across the board to reduce red tape for Canadian citizens generally, but we are also focusing that effort to protect the interests of senior citizens.

We have also implemented changes to the Canada pension plan so that seniors have the freedom to choose to keep working and contributing to their pension fund. This is important because, as we all know, the demographics of Canada are shifting. We know that the baby boomers are aging and that we face a demographic challenge in our country. However, we also recognize the absolutely remarkable and important contribution that senior citizens can make in their workplace even after they reach the age of 65, through mentorship programs and a whole host of other things. As a matter of fact, I know of senior citizens who made their biggest and most important contributions to the workplace after they were into their 60s and 70s. Even in this House, we have members who are making a contribution long after they are 65. So we know the importance of and believe in the freedom of senior citizens to continue to contribute in the workforce after they reach the age of 65, and to be able to contribute to their pension funds after that.

We are also very concerned about the well-being of senior citizens and that is why we have invested over \$13 million in a campaign to raise awareness about and to combat elder abuse. We are also bringing forward a whole host of criminal justice reforms that are applauded by senior citizens, because they know the importance of safety and security and living in their own homes into their retirements.

Mr. Speaker, you are going to cut me off, but I do appreciate the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

● (1525)

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during the course of my hon. colleague's deliberations, the member for Peace River asked why Canadians and perhaps people on this side of the House were opposed to the Conservative budgetary and other policies.

Business of Supply

Well, I have a partial list. How about \$60 billion in tax cuts to profitable corporations? How about cuts to organizations like KAIROS because they criticized the government for its environmental policy? How about the abuse of our veterans, with clawbacks of their pensions? How about \$857 million for summits, fake lakes, gazebos, photo ops and partisan ads? How about their providing in the budget less than half of what was needed to lift all seniors out of poverty? What about the cuts to organizations that worked for women's equality? How about a government that used the Senate to stop NDP bills like the one for generic drugs for those living with HIV-AIDS and sufferers of TB and malaria in Africa, not to mention how it used the summit to undermine our environmental bill?

Why on earth would the government invest \$35 billion in jets and not in seniors when it obviously has the resources? Will the member support this motion to lift seniors out of poverty?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, I do thank the hon. member for bringing forward the motion, but in the question she does not get to the crux of the matter.

What are we going to do for seniors to ensure they can stay in their homes longer, that they can make choices that actually improve their own well-being? Our government is focused on that with a feasible, cost-effective plan to ensure that seniors will have more money in their pocket so they can remain in their homes and continue to live well into their senior years. This plan includes a whole host of different measures.

The hon. member was part of a party that did not even read this budget or the last number of budgets. Her party actually told the Canadian people that it was proud it had not read the budgets. The hon. member has voted against successive budgets brought forward by the Conservative government with the many measures that I have described today that have reduced seniors' poverty in this country, including a \$300 million investment in seniors through the GIS increase, the largest in 25 years. So even when the NDP was talking with the Liberals about a so-called NDP budget, it included no reflections on this as a priority. Clearly, that is why—

The Speaker: Questions and comments, the hon. member for Winnipeg North.

• (1530)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member talks about issues such as independent living.

I agree that we need to look at independent living and allow seniors the ability to afford to continue to live in an independent way. One of the ways in which that can be done is through the provision of the necessary funds so they can pay for the pharmaceutical costs, which are going up, and some of the home care services that are becoming higher in need as people age.

Yet, at the same time, the public sees these huge increases in tax benefits to corporations and government expenditures that are questionable such as the purchase of the jets.

People wonder why the government is not recognizing the value of the seniors and ensuring that seniors who want to live independently are able to access those drugs. It is becoming more difficult because the cost of drugs is going up.

For the fiscal years of 2012-13, does the member see another increase to the GIS? Is this just a one-time hit?

Many, including myself and the Liberal Party, would argue that what we are giving in terms of an increase today is not enough. Does the member anticipate more increases to the GIS in 2012-13?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the remarks made by my colleague from Winnipeg North.

On the health care front, our government has made it very clear that we will continue to contribute to the health transfers and we will see increases, as we have over the last number of years. There are no cutbacks. During the 1990s the Liberal government slashed those transfers, but our government is committed to not doing that. We are going to continue to invest in health care across the country.

We have had a whole host of budgets, but let us focus on this last budget, the one that was brought forward before the election. The Liberal members, with the New Democratic members and the Bloc Québécois, voted down a budget that would see the largest increase to the GIS in over 25 years. They voted against that to cause an unnecessary and costly election. Talk about misplaced priorities.

Canadians, and especially senior citizens, recognize that this was a misplaced priority. That is why my hon. colleague across the way is now part of the third party in the House rather than the official opposition.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my fellow caucus member for some of his answers.

There was some comment made by an NDP member about the fictitious clawback. The change in the retirement regime for Canadian Forces members has been in place since the mid-1960s. Those members do not tell people the fact that members of the Canadian Forces at that time signed off on it.

We are dealing with seniors and what the government has done with regard to seniors. Would the member like to comment about the 80,000-plus seniors who have been taken off the federal income tax rolls since we have been in government?

I am glad the member mentioned the guaranteed income supplement enhancement and the fact that it has been almost a quarter of a century since we have dealt with that.

Could the member make some additional comments with regard to seniors and how important they are to our government?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, I will follow up with regard to veterans issues.

Our government recognized there were some necessary investments that needed to be made to ensure veterans were provided with the best care. That is why we saw one of the largest infusions of cash into the veterans affairs envelope, in excess of \$2 billion, to ensure we addressed all of the outstanding concerns with regard to the care of our veterans.

Business of Supply

I am very proud to be part of a government that has taken real action on these issues. Unfortunately the opposition members have continued to vote against such measures. They have been solid in their rhetoric, but have never come forward with support when it comes to voting on these things and making these investments.

I want to get back to the 85,000 senior citizens who have been taken off the tax rolls completely. Six years ago they were paying federal income tax. Today they do not because of the many changes that we have made with regard to providing more tax relief to seniors so they can continue to earn an income. A single person can make over \$19,000 and a couple can make over \$38,000 without paying any income tax at all.

• (1535)

Mr. Mathieu Ravnat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what the hon. member just does not seem to get is that this is about dignity. The motion targets the most vulnerable seniors, many of them senior women. The additional money in the budget will not bring these people out of poverty. The government's measures will not lift even half of the seniors out of poverty.

Currently more 200,000 seniors are living in poverty, some of them in abject poverty. With our motion, we can make a significant and positive impact on the everyday lives of people without spending all that much money. Why is the member against this?

Mr. Chris Warkentin: Mr. Speaker, I am very supportive of the idea of lifting every senior out of poverty. That is why I am proud to be part of a government that has actually done that.

The hon. member talks about the motion having some capacity to do anything in terms of lifting people out of poverty, but there is no plan attached. Our government has the plan. The plan has been to lift all seniors out of poverty. That is why Canada currently has one of the lowest rates of senior poverty in the world. This is a remarkable feat, especially as we have just come through one of the greatest recessions and the most fiscally difficult times.

Where other governments have slashed benefits for senior citizens, this government is solidly standing with seniors across the country.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

I begin by thanking the member for London—Fanshawe for introducing this very important motion for us to discuss in the House today. Contrary to what other members have said, New Democrats do have a plan for poverty reduction. That was Bill C-545, An Act to Eliminate Poverty in Canada introduced in June 2010. It laid out a detailed strategy for poverty elimination in the country, and I was pleased to reintroduce that bill today.

I again want to acknowledge the very good work that Tony Martin, the former member for Sault Ste. Marie, did.

As well, New Democrats have also had other plans around helping people living in poverty. One was the former Bill C-304, An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians introduced by the member for Vancouver East.

Contrary to what we have heard in the House, New Democrats do have plans around poverty reduction.

I want to remind the House, because we have had a bit of a break, about what we are speaking about today. The New Democrat opposition day motion states:

That, in the opinion of this House, ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible, and, therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the Guaranteed Income Supplement sufficiently to achieve that goal.

There has been much talk so far today about the 2011 budget. Contrary to what members of the government have said, I can assure members that many New Democrats have read that budget as have many members of the public.

I will quote a couple of things from a news release from Campaign 2000 dated June 6, 2011. This reflects in part why New Democrats do not want to support that budget.

Gerda Kaegi of the Canadian Pensioners Concerned said, "The one measure to address poverty among seniors' is paltry". The release goes on to say:

The \$50 monthly increase to the Guaranteed Income Supplement for seniors is only available to those on the very least income. This proposed change is about one-third of what is needed to bring single seniors – who are mostly women – out of poverty.

Further on in the news release it says:

This budget does little to bolster the tattered safety net that has left Canadians in economic insecurity. Aboriginal people, sole support mothers, recent immigrants, racialized groups, and people with disabilities face greater risks. At the same time, inequality between the rich and the poor in Canada has grown more than in any other OECD country (except Germany).

That comment was by Dennis Howlett of Make Poverty History.

I only have 10 minutes, so unfortunately I cannot go through all the reasons why New Democrats would not support the budget.

I want to turn briefly to a report "Federal Poverty Reduction Plan: Working in Partnership Towards Reducing Poverty in Canada" from November 2010. This was an extensive piece of work that looked at the state of poverty reduction plans in the country and made numerous recommendations. I want to quote a couple of statistics out of this, and we are talking about seniors today.

It says:

The GIS is an ideal means of reducing poverty among seniors because it targets those with a low income, particularly seniors living alone. In 2007, seniors living alone represented 28% of all seniors, but 60% of GIS recipients and 82% of seniors living below the LICOs. A senior living alone with no income other than the maximum OAS and GIS benefits would receive combined benefits of about \$14,033 (January 2010 rates), which is below the LICOs for 2008 (the latest available) for a person living alone in an urban centre with a population of 30,000 or more.

The people who are receiving GIS and OAS are the poorest of the poor of the seniors and often between OAS and GIS that is pretty much all they have for an income.

This article goes on.

Business of Supply

The member for London—Fanshawe ably outlined all of the reasons why the House should unanimously support the New Democrat motion, but I want to raise another issue that has not been raised.

Again, in this report it says that other witnesses spoke about the lack of awareness of the GIS. I want to turn briefly to the National Advisory Council on Aging, “Aging in Poverty in Canada: Seniors on the Margins”. It pointed out a couple of serious problems.

First, we have a program that is inadequate, but what we actually know is that many seniors are not accessing this already inadequate program. It says in this report that as no reliable statistics existed on under-subscription or late renewals, the National Council on Aging had research carried out in the summer of 2004 to assess the situation.

● (1540)

This research yielded a clear picture of under-subscription to the OAS and the Canada pension plan, revealing that large numbers of elderly seniors have not applied for these programs.

For a variety of reasons, seniors simply do not apply for these programs. New Democrats have argued that they should just be incorporated into a system like the income tax system, so that seniors at the age of 65 would not have to apply. They would automatically be considered.

Under OAS, the NACA report says about 50,000 have not applied and under GIS about 300,000 have not applied. Under CPP retirement pension about 55,000 have not applied. There is no estimate available for those who have not applied for disability benefits or survivor benefits. Many New Democrats have done CPP, disability and survivor benefit workshops in their ridings because many Canadians are simply not aware that they are entitled to those benefits.

This article goes on to say:

The sums in question are considerable. For example, the 50,000 seniors who are eligible for OAS but do not apply sustain a total income loss of \$250 million a year.

That is \$250 million that is not going back into our communities. When seniors apply for these benefits, they spend the money on food, on shelter, and minimal living expenses, which is all money that comes back into our communities.

The article goes on to say:

It is more often women, particularly elderly women, who fail to apply for the GIS – a group that is most at risk of living in poverty. It is worth noting that seniors who are entitled to the GIS but who do not apply are deprived not only of their GIS income, but also of all the other benefits provided through provincial and territorial programs that use the GIS as an eligibility criterion.

Not only is it affecting their GIS, but it is affecting some of their other provincial benefits. That is why it is so important that we look at a system that makes it far easier for seniors to access these benefits.

I know we are talking about the GIS, but I want to talk briefly about CPP because there is another huge injustice built into this program.

Lateness in applying for CPP benefits causes serious prejudice. Currently, a person who is late applying for his or her pension under

the CPP is only entitled to 11 months of retroactive benefits. The case of a woman named Isabel, age 90, is cited. She discovers that she has been entitled to the CPP survivor benefit for the past 15 years but did not know it. Her husband Jim died at the age of 83 without ever drawing a pension. Her late application means she is entitled to retroactive benefits for a mere 11 months, even though her husband contributed to the plan while he was working and the money was his due and hers. That is a very sad statement. This is another case of late renewal.

In July year after year GIS and allowance recipients must renew their application for benefits by filling out an income tax declaration or a renewal form. Every year close to 100,000 seniors fail to renew their application on time. At present, they are sent a reminder with an enclosed renewal application form. If they fail to respond, they are temporarily excluded from the program and do not receive their benefits for July or the following month until the application for renewal is completed.

The report goes on to talk about 105,000 seniors who did not receive their GIS cheque and more than 9,000 who did not receive their allowance benefits because they had not completed their renewal on time. For many seniors this is an issue of low literacy, little or no knowledge of the programs, language barriers, and sometimes there are mental health issues. We need to make it as easy as possible for seniors.

I will just make a little note on this. A person receiving GIS benefits can lose up to \$561 each month. So it is a significant amount of money for people who are living in poverty.

It is unfortunate that my time is up because I wanted to talk about hunger count and the food banks, and the fact that we are seeing an increasing number of seniors using food banks. The 2010 report indicated that the number of seniors helped by food banks grew this year from 5.5% of adults in 2008-09 to 7.2% in 2010. In some provinces, like Ontario, it was 12% and in Manitoba it was 15%. We are seeing some serious problems in our country. Seniors are being forced into using food banks just to keep food on their tables.

I would urge all members of the House to support the motion put forward by the member for London—Fanshawe. This is a small step in the right direction to help lift seniors out of poverty.

● (1545)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, governments have shown in the past that a difference can be made in poverty rates. When we look back to the 1980s when poverty in seniors communities was about 21%, our predecessors and those who came before us had made some good decisions. I think the guaranteed income supplement is something that has had an impact and will continue to have an impact.

Tony Martin from the NDP and Mike Savage, former member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, did an awful lot on this file. The Conservative chair at the time was very gracious and said that the study tabled in November 2010 was a good study. At the time, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives had identified that an increase in the GIS of about 15% would have done a considerable amount to lift seniors out of poverty.

Business of Supply

The NDP's platform had identified about \$700 million. The suggestion was \$1.2 million. I am wondering why that gap had not been bridged or addressed in the motion. Why did we not look at bridging the gap between the two numbers?

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, of course, I was remiss in not acknowledging the work that Mike Savage had done along with Tony Martin. I know they worked very hard together and were strong voices in the House for a poverty reduction strategy.

When we talk about how much money over how long, I acknowledge that what New Democrats have put forward today is a pragmatic, practical, and feasible solution that is fiscally possible in our current climate. However, is it enough? Absolutely not. I would argue that we need that plan I was talking about and that Tony and Mike had worked on. We need a national act for poverty elimination in this country.

When people talk about how seniors' poverty has been reduced over the years, over the last 30 years it has come down, but the current government can take no credit for this. It came about because of the implementation of the GIS and the CPP.

A couple of decades ago we started to see Canadians receiving their full entitlement under the Canada pension plan. That is when we started to see the poverty rates for seniors start to come down. We have hit the bottom of that curve now and poverty for seniors is starting to trend up again.

I would argue that this is a good first step toward helping seniors live a more dignified life.

• (1550)

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate what the member has been speaking about. I have visited her riding as part of the tour I did over two summers ago, visiting 20 communities and listening to seniors.

I think we should try to correct the record here. The previous government speaker talked about the failure to pass the budget and that we voted against it. Let me be clear, there was no vote on the March budget because the government was found in contempt by the House and fell.

It is very significant that the government had pushed that vote to the following week. It knew full well that the motion was going to come before the House on the Friday because the Speaker found a prima facie case of contempt against the government.

Ms. Jean Crowder: Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely right and I am glad he corrected the record. The government did not fall in March on a budget vote. It fell on a vote of non-confidence in the House because of findings of contempt from the committee that had reviewed the matter.

To conclude, I also want to acknowledge the very good work that the member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek has done on seniors' issues and pensions. I look forward to hearing more from him later on today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Is the member for Ottawa—Orléans rising on a point of order?

Mr. Royal Galipeau: No, Mr. Speaker, I was rising on questions and comments.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Sorry, that has concluded, my apologies. Resuming debate, the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to participate for some 10 minutes on the important motion that has been introduced by my colleague, the member for London—Fanshawe. The motion, as has been stated, reads:

That, in the opinion of this House, ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible, and, therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the Guaranteed Income Supplement sufficiently to achieve that goal.

As was mentioned by my colleague, the previous speaker, this issue certainly deserves a lot more money than what we have already proposed. We are talking about a commitment of \$700 million to increase the GIS sufficiently to lift the 200,000 seniors, who are now living below the poverty line, up to and slightly over the poverty line.

It is very modest program, frankly, but it is a practical program. I talked a lot about it on the doorsteps in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour because it is a move forward. We wanted to present that kind of an achievable plan that would actually make a difference in the lives of Canadians. The official figures say 200,000, but according to some estimates there are 250,000 to 300,000 seniors who live below the poverty line.

We have introduced a plan. The NDP has introduced legislation to deal with this matter. We have clearly laid out steps that would achieve this goal, again, a very modest goal, but we have also talked about things like strengthening and expanding the CPP, the Canada pension plan, doing the little things in a very comprehensive way that would make a difference in the lives of seniors. However, every step along the way the government has refused to acknowledge the priority of seniors in the communities of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, and frankly, across this country.

We heard members of the government benches today explain why it was okay to have 6% or 8% of seniors in this country living below the poverty line. We heard them explain why it was good enough to have \$300 million being put into the whole question of lifting seniors out of poverty. It would only deal with a fraction. It has been estimated that would increase some benefits to the tune of \$1.65 a day, and that is somehow good enough.

At the same time the Conservatives are foregoing billions of dollars as a result of corporate tax cuts, and those tax cuts are resulting in hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars staying in bank accounts, and going into the savings and investment accounts of highly paid executives.

It is a question of priorities, and the government's priorities have abandoned seniors. The Conservatives failed to deal with the essential question: are seniors living in dignity? The housing costs, the cost of food, the cost of medications, the cost of being able to live independently are simply out of reach for far too many seniors in this country and in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

Business of Supply

I spoke about these issues as I canvassed throughout the election campaign, not only with seniors but with their children and their grandchildren, who were so frustrated by the fact that their parents and grandparents had contributed so much to their community, had contributed so much to their families, had contributed so much to this country, yet now, because of an inadequate Canada pension plan, because of the inability to have a workplace pension plan, because they worked at home raising children and therefore were not able to participate in the Canada pension plan, those parents and grandparents were suddenly in a situation where they could not afford to make ends meet.

We have heard today my colleagues on this side talk about what that reality is. They talked about seniors in their community who are cutting down their prescription medications and taking them every other day instead of every day, or once a week, and going to food banks to get a decent meal.

• (1555)

I just made a couple of phone calls to food banks in Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, which, unfortunately, are serving not only seniors but children and families in the constituency, as they are throughout this country. There are upwards of 7% of adults, in the area of 1,500 to 2,000 seniors, who are attending food banks every month in Nova Scotia. These are seniors who cannot put food on their tables and therefore must use food banks.

A colleague told me today that he was on Elgin Street last night and he ran into a senior citizen who lives in an apartment but does not have enough money left over at the end of the month. This senior citizen was panhandling on the street in order to try to find some money for a hot meal. That is the reality.

When I talk to seniors in my community, it breaks my heart. When I go into some of the apartment buildings and see the conditions in which some of the seniors are living, it breaks my heart. I cannot believe that, in a country as rich as Canada, it is acceptable to have 250,000 seniors living like that, or that it would be adequate to have even one senior citizen living in those kinds of conditions. We have a responsibility to do better.

I appreciate the remarks made about my predecessor, the former member from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, who worked hard on the issue of poverty. I have made a commitment to the people of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, who have given me their trust, to pick up that baton and to continue to raise those issues and to continue to push for those kinds of changes while I have their confidence and while I am here.

One of my colleagues talked about some of the agencies and the volunteers who work with seniors in order to make their lives better. These are seniors who are living at or below the poverty line, those who are living in isolation and those who are not able to afford medication and proper, healthy food. There are organizations, including Campbell's Cole Harbour Senior Citizen Club in my community. I have been there a couple of times for lunch, as I mentioned earlier. It is an organization funded with donations and through the efforts of volunteers.

Aggie, who is 69, is the coordinator of the volunteers who buy the groceries to make meals in the kitchen, which they sell at a

subsidized rate to seniors who, in many cases, would not be able to afford a decent meal each week but they know they can go to the Campbell's Cole Harbour Senior Citizen Club and do that.

The Dartmouth Senior Citizens Service Centre on Ochterloney Street is another facility that gets seniors out of their apartments and is able to pay attention to those people who may not be getting the kind of sustenance they require in order to stay healthy.

That is what is required in their communities, that level of commitment by seniors and by others in the community to help seniors.

I hope all members will support the motion before us today. The least we can do in this country and in this House is to support seniors and ensure they do not live another day in poverty.

• (1600)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate most of what my colleagues have said today. It is unbelievable how many seniors in our communities are living in poverty.

For example, Elliot Lake is basically a retirement community. When my leader came to do a tour, we heard over and over again from seniors that they could not even heat their homes in the wintertime. It is pretty cold in Elliot Lake. One senior was actually living in only one room of his apartment because he could not afford to make ends meet. When the HST came in it was even worse for him.

When we look at this, today 5.8% of Canadians age 65 and older are living in poverty.

Earlier today, a colleague across the way talked about a program that teaches people how to save money and the people were saving \$10 a month. That is only \$120 a year. I know I would not be able to save for my retirement at \$120 a year.

Perhaps my colleague could explain why we are saying that we need to invest in seniors and we need to ensure they are not living in poverty, which is why we need to get rid of corporate tax cuts.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, it is about priorities. Who do we support? Do we care that corporate executives have enough money to buy a second, third or fourth house? Do we want to ensure that investors are able to travel the world in their own private jet? Are we able to ensure that we send billions of dollars back to the United States to the head offices of foreign companies to ensure they are able to continue to do business? Is that where our priorities lie?

We think it should be with seniors. It should be ensuring that seniors can afford their medications, afford a decent meal and afford to live in a safe and comfortable home. Those are the kinds of priorities the New Democratic Party has and that is why this resolution has to be supported.

Business of Supply

•(1605)

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I liked the comments made by my colleague, who really emphasized the importance of seniors within our communities and our country, Canada. I would like to ask him the following question.

[*English*]

One of the extraordinary improvements in this budget that deals directly with seniors is the caregiver tax credit. It is something that allows people to stay at home and take care of a loved one and receive a direct monetary incentive for doing so, something we have never seen before in Canada.

I would just like to hear what the member opposite has to say about that great advance.

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Mr. Speaker, the government has certainly been very adept at helping people who earn enough money. They can afford a tax credit if they are earning enough income.

We are talking about seniors who do not have enough money, who are living on an annual income below \$15,000 a year. We need to understand what that means. It means people who cannot afford to pay for desperately needed drugs, people who cannot afford to put food on their table or have a safe and comfortable place to live. A tax credit does not help those people. The government must understand that.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to speak today to the NDP motion. In essence, we are talking about the issue of seniors, which is extremely important to all of us.

Canada's seniors have worked hard to build a better country for future generations. Therefore, it is very important during this time that we all work together to ensure that seniors get the benefits they are entitled to and that they do not fall through the cracks.

Since our government came into power in 2006, we have brought in various initiatives to help seniors, giving about \$2.3 billion in targeted tax relief in 2011-12. As well, since this government came into power and addressed the needs of seniors, we now have the lowest rate in the world for seniors in poverty. That is a huge achievement since the time we took over as government when the rates were higher.

In 1999, the rate was 7.9% and today the rate has fallen to 5.8%. However, that does not mean that we do not have much to do. Indeed, we have a lot of things to do. We need to continue working to ensure that no senior lives in poverty.

One of the members who served in the last Parliament said that the opposition did not act on the budget but defeated this government on a vote of confidence. Let me say very clearly that that was a political move by the opposition when it had the numbers. It wanted to play political games and brought in a motion of non-confidence. It was absolutely wrong for the member to say that the Speaker ruled that there was contempt of Parliament. The Speaker said that there was a possibility. However, the opposition played politics and at the end of the day that sent us into an election.

Everybody has said that they went to the homes of seniors. I have many seniors in my constituency too. When I visited them, they wanted to know why we were having an election and why we were wasting \$300 million for an unnecessary election.

The Canadian public spoke and those who were on this side, more specifically the Liberal Party which was pushing for this so-called vote of confidence and contempt of Parliament, is today sitting at the far end of the House because Canadians have spoken and they gave this government a strong mandate for the next four and a half years to put things in order. That is what those guys forget. It was not what they said in this Parliament. It was what Canadians said through the ballot box. Now they can answer why they wasted \$300 million of taxpayer money.

Some low-income seniors get the guaranteed income supplement and some get CPP. At the end of the day, if the economy is fragile and it is not moving forward, we will not be in a position to help seniors. To help seniors best, we need a strong economy in which they can have a lot of advantages, including the guaranteed income supplement and additional resources. We must not forget that this is in conjunction with our provincial counterparts, which also have programs to ensure that seniors are looked after.

The one thing that is absolutely clear when members speak in Parliament is that we all recognize that seniors have played a very important role in building this country and that it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that they are taken care of.

•(1610)

However, we just cannot have tunnel vision to take care of them. We need to have vast programs because there are many seniors out there with a lot of different needs. For that, the Government of Canada has brought in a lot of programs. Pension splitting is one program to ensure that seniors keep more money at home. On tax relief, we have freed more than 85,000 seniors from paying taxes. All of these measures go in a small way to help out seniors, to ensure they have more tax-free money in their pockets, to have the freedom to have a lifestyle that they want and deserve.

Of course, at a certain stage in life, there were those who did not contribute to the pension plan in the past, who did not have any other pension available to them. For that, we brought in the OAS and the GIS. In the last budget this government introduced a special supplement to be given to those who are below the poverty line and could not meet their needs, by giving them an additional \$600 per single and \$800-plus for a couple. This was to help them out because that is what we have learned. What did the NDP do? It played a part in the politics that defeated the budget here in the last Parliament.

I am very happy to say that Canadians sent us back and we have re-introduced those measures that could go a long way to help seniors.

Business of Supply

All my colleagues say they go to seniors' homes. We all go to seniors' homes to sit and listen. They vote. Let me say in no uncertain terms that seniors are very intelligent people because they have lessons of life behind them. They know how to make sound decisions. Therefore, it is clearly important that we listen to them, we hear them and we take that in. For that reason, this government introduced a special position of minister of state for seniors. That is very critical, specifically a minister responsible for ensuring that the voices of seniors are heard, and through her at this current time, that reaches the cabinet table and into the government decision-making process. Henceforth, that is a very key element.

I have been here for 14 years and we have been hearing all of those things. However, this government has a clear record of helping seniors, first of course to see that nobody falls down, and those who have fallen down to pick them up and off they go. There is a lot of work to do. I am very proud to say that we have at this time the lowest rate of seniors' poverty in the world. Why do I say that? As parliamentary secretary for foreign affairs I get opportunities to travel around the world representing Canada. As I do, I can say that the situation in other parts of the world is really horrendous for seniors and it is due to a culmination of reasons such as bad economy, bad governance, no social programs and seniors are left to fend for themselves. This is a terrible situation in other parts of the world. However, here, we are fortunate enough in our country that this government worked very hard through listening to seniors and that we have created programs that will ensure that most seniors will get their needs and the things they want.

I am speaking also from experience because my mother is a senior. She receives a lot of the benefits and she tells me without question that if she does not get something, she will wring my head off. It is as simple as ABC. She is my mother and she has all the right to wring my head off. Naturally, I listen to what my mother has to say. She stays in a seniors' home and she is surrounded by seniors. She gets input from seniors as to what kind of programs and what kind of things the government is doing.

• (1615)

As I said, there is a provincial government role as well. So it is important for us that both the provinces and the federal government work together to ensure that the seniors receive the benefits they need.

In many places I have heard about situations where a partner dies and the woman is unable to pay for her house. So she may have to move out of her house. Some of the suggestions are that seniors should have property tax freedom, that they should not be paying property taxes. These are all issues that the provinces and municipalities have to address.

From the point of view of the Government of Canada, the key issue to ensure for seniors is of course the OAS and the GIS. That remains key.

We must also be cognizant that we do not put all of our resources into one area, but that it covers a wider scale of things, to more seniors so that we do not have seniors slipping down as well. That is what the government has done.

Our economy is improving thanks to the excellent management by this government when the world economy was shaken. Because of that we have been able to address many of the concerns.

We are still in a fragile economic recovery. As we heard the Minister of Finance say today, the housing market in the U.S.A is still shaky. The debt crisis in Greece and in the European Union will have a negative impact on this country. If it has a negative impact on this country, of course that means a recession here which means less money to give out to programs.

This is nonsense rhetoric which we saw on the weekend with the NDP trying to decide whether the members want to be socialist or they do not want to be socialist. I am a little surprised that the debate even took place.

The business about our giving tax cuts to corporations or that corporations should not get tax cuts, it does not work that way.

It works in a way to ensure that there the economic conditions develop for businesses to thrive, for a robust economy which would help government coffers, which in turn would help pay for the services that the NDP is talking about and what its motion is about.

Somehow the NDP thinks money is grown on trees, among other things. Remember what the current Liberal who was the former NDP premier of Ontario did to his economy, also in British Columbia and other provinces.

The fact still remains that a robust economy will allow Canada to address the issues that the seniors need to have addressed and to say quite clearly that the government, through sound management, has managed to reduce poverty levels to the lowest one in the whole world.

There is still work to be done and this government will continue doing that work through our Minister of State for Seniors and through ensuring there is a sound economic management of this country which will enable us to meet the needs of the seniors.

• (1620)

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened very carefully to the hon. member's eloquent speech.

A couple of things really strike me and I wanted to bring them up. The government talks a lot about the economy improving and yet seniors cannot seem to reap any of the benefits of this economic expansion. In fact, more and more seniors in my riding of Davenport are living in poverty.

It is nice to hear the government is finally adopting some of the NDP's messaging around seniors. It now says it wants to lift every senior out of poverty. If the government wants to lift every senior out of poverty, then what does it say to seniors in Davenport and right across the country who, in the last election, were asking the question about why the government was giving seniors \$1.65 in its plan and giving the bankers billions?

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for listening very carefully to my speech. He is a new member and was listening very carefully, so I thank him very much.

Business of Supply

Being a new member, he is saying that we have not done anything for seniors, but I can tell him for the record what this government has done since coming to power in 2006 until now, giving \$2.3 billion in targeted relief to seniors.

As well, and let me just say it one more time, we have the lowest rate of inflation in the world. We have brought it down. This government brought it down. That is quite a significant achievement.

The member should support this budget because there is an increase in this budget for those seniors living on the poverty line of \$600 for single seniors and \$800 for couples. Therefore, I would ask that the member please support this budget so that they can get that money.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is always such a pleasure to listen to the member for Calgary East when he addresses the House.

The increase in the GIS initiative undertaken by the government is a half measure. We had this debate on another topic last week. It is a small gesture but will it really play a role? I think that is what we are debating here today.

The member is aware of the study that was undertaken and tabled in the House in November of last year by the Standing Committee on HRSD. During one of the presentations there was much discussion and a number of interventions talking about the guaranteed income supplement, knowing that it is a good tool to use to help those in poverty. Could he comment on what the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives had put forward? The minimum increase that it sought was \$1.2 billion per year, which would increase each GIS by about \$100 per month.

There is a significant gap between what the government did and what was being called for at the time. Does he see that this is a half measure on the part of his government?

• (1625)

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Speaker, I always welcome questions from my friend on the other side.

It is quite interesting when he talks about the small measures, yet when he was the government opposition, Liberal members voted against every measure that would have helped seniors. One minute they were against it, now he says it is a half measure. That is why Canadians gave us a majority as a strong mandate to ensure that we will do what we have promised to do.

To answer his question, I would ask the member to please support the budget because there is an increase for seniors in this budget, \$600 for a single senior and \$800 for couples.

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Calgary East for talking so clearly to the measures that we have taken for seniors and also how important it is.

There are two issues I want to ask him about. I will try to squeeze them into one question.

We hear the opposition talk about corporate tax cuts. I am hoping he can talk about why having a competitive economy is very important for us to be able to do the things we need to do. Also, in

the last economic action plan, how much was actually spent in support of housing? In my riding we almost doubled support for housing for seniors.

Again, we need to have a strong economy to have that money to do what we need to do. Perhaps he could talk about those issues.

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague talked about the economy and how if we have a competitive economy the government has the ability to provide the services that are needed.

At the current time, the crisis in Greece very clearly indicates that if we have irresponsible economic policies like those that the NDP is proposing, look at what would happen to our economy. Because the government of Greece cannot provide services to its citizens any longer there are riots in the streets in Greece. Had it exercised sound management policies for its economy, it would have had the money to provide the services that were necessary to help its seniors and everyone else and there would not be rioting in the streets.

This is why we say we need a sound economic management for this country. That is what this government will provide.

[Translation]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we must consider the fact that, in 2010, in urban centres, the maximum payment for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement was less than \$5,039 a year. The increase provided in the budget will only benefit single seniors whose additional income is less than \$2,000 a year, so that makes a total of about \$7,039 a year. I would like my hon. colleague to tell me how a paltry \$50 a month will affect the life of a senior living alone and below the poverty line. Can he tell me how this meagre amount will help them get out of poverty, especially since the 85,000 seniors my colleague mentioned do not pay taxes and therefore cannot benefit from these tax credits? Personally, I do not see how this measly \$50 will help get these seniors out of poverty.

[English]

Mr. Deepak Obhrai: Mr. Speaker, as I said, when it comes to giving relief, we need to look at the larger picture to ensure all seniors benefit from this, not just look at the smaller picture.

This government provided \$400 million in affordable housing for low income seniors, aside from providing income splitting and topping up of the GIS. All of this was designed to help seniors stay out of poverty.

We reduced the poverty level from 7.9% in 1999 to 5.8% in 2008. We will continue. The budget provides extra income for that. As our economy produces, we will continue listening to seniors and we will continue to provide relief to them. This government stands on its record, which is a record of doing it and producing it.

• (1630)

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time today with the new member of Parliament for Scarborough—Rouge River.

The member just said that the government would be listening to seniors for sure. Sure it will. It will be listening to the growl in their stomachs as they are sitting there in hunger.

Business of Supply

I want to take a moment to recognize the member for London—Fanshawe who has taken over as the critic for seniors. I had the seniors and pensions over the last couple of years, in fact, since 2009, and I am very proud that we are going to have this dynamic woman taking on this challenge. I am looking forward to see the work that will come out of her in the next little while.

The NDP and retirement security is nothing new. In 1927, the labour party of the day forced the Mackenzie King government to bring in old age security because we had Canadians starving across the country. In 1966, NDP Stanley Knowles, again with a Liberal minority, went to the Liberals and said that we needed to have something broader, something in order for every Canadian to have a pension plan. That was the Canada pension plan. It was something that was put forward and passed.

However, we find ourselves today in a crisis. The crisis is the fact that the Canada pension plan going forward will not be effective enough.

However, a more urgent crisis that we have today is that between 250,000 and 300,000 seniors are living clearly below the poverty line. They are living on approximately \$1,162 a month when we combine GIS and OAS. Part of the real tragedy is that most of these people are women, women who had the menial jobs or perhaps never got the chance to line up and get into CPP with the rest of us. It is very troubling.

I have been the critic since 2009, as I said, and I have a number of stories to tell. I had to consider what to talk about here today. I think there is a myth, for lack of a better word. Members will recall that in the recent election plan we were talking about what the NDP thought would be the appropriate thing to do. That was not new at all.

In June 2009, in this House, we passed an opposition day motion unanimously. Everyone voted for it. The number one piece in that motion at the time was \$700 million to raise 250,000 seniors out of poverty.

When we paused to take a look at the half measure, or I would say half of a half measure, because \$700 million over 250,000 to 300,000 people is approximately a \$230 a month increase. The measure we are getting across here is \$50, or \$1.65 a day. In the provinces of Ontario and B.C. that is already eaten up by the HST.

I would have loved to have had the Conservatives listen to us. They voted with us. They gave the impression that they had listened to us. The NDP went across the country. We hear about the solid mandate they have. Guess which caucus tripled in the last election? It is because seniors and Canadians were listening to us. They knew that the number one proposal in our election plan was to increase the GIS to an adequate level for seniors to get them above the poverty line.

I am not going to take any lessons from the member for Calgary West at all on this one.

The opposition day motion that we have put into place has a double purpose. It obviously addresses the short term, the immediacy of the situation of GIS, but the next thing it does is it looks to our future.

We have heard repeatedly in this House that 63% of working Canadians today do not have a pension and do not have savings. Where are we going to be in 35 years? There will be a wall that these people will strike.

It is crucial that this House starts working together to do something to increase the Canada pension plan. We have put forward a proposal that if the employee puts in 2.5% and the employer puts in 2.5%, in 35 years the worker will have a double Canada pension plan.

● (1635)

We have had two disputes in the labour movement just recently, one with Air Canada and the other with Canada Post. In both those instances, they are trying to destroy the defined benefit pension plans. Some of those people have worked for 35 years at those companies. I received an email from one person who was planning to retire in two months from Air Canada with a \$1,600 pension. Had that proposal gone through, he would only have had \$800 to retire, thus he could not retire.

All these stories are coming from the government that seniors will be allowed to work longer. The idea always was that seniors would move to retirement where they could live in dignity and enjoy some time with their spouses from whom they have been away all of their years.

When this attack comes, it will be the responsibility of the government of the day to look to the future. We need to look to the future with an investment. Workers are willing to pay part of that investment. Increasing the Canada pension plan or doubling Canada pension plan will not cost the government one penny. Canadians have always been prepared to pay their way and this is one more time.

We have heard proposals in different places about voluntary types of programs. If workers had money in the bank now, they would have set up their own plans. The reality is that we need to help Canadians focus themselves. I did not look to my future until I was in my fifties, which is a long time ago now, come to think of it, but the reality is that most young people do not. They have these items out there that sparkle so brightly, such as iPads, iPhones or whatever. They invest their time and energy in those. We need to help them as a government. We need to show leadership in this place.

The other thing about the Canada pension plan is that it is totally portable in this country. If there is a downturn in one area, workers are free to move to another area and take that pension plan with them. I really want to stress that today.

I want to come back a little bit, and, Mr. Speaker, you may need to correct me, because I have a tendency to turn to talk to the other side when I know I am supposed to speak through the Speaker, but I cannot help myself because I know there are good people sitting over there. We try to appeal to them with the various stories and things that have happened.

I spent two summers as the critic going to seniors meetings. I attended 40 community meetings, 20 each summer for the last two summers. There are heartrending stories that we hear at those times. I have repeated them before but they still bear repeating today.

Business of Supply

In St. Thomas, a woman had retired, but her husband was two years short of retirement when he had a stroke. He was getting medication. We have all kinds of buzzwords and one of them in the world today is “delisting”. The woman's husband had a \$90 a month prescription that just got delisted by the province of Ontario. She wondered where she could find the \$90, and that was before HST.

Speaking of HST, a woman in Elliott Lake, who I will never forget, said to me, and it is interesting that people like her always take us outside because this is very personal for them, “My hydro bill is \$2,100 a year. They are talking about HST. Where will I find the \$160?” God help that woman. The price of hydro has gone up, plus the HST.

I want to stress the importance of putting aside rhetoric. It is a fact that banks in this country made \$22 billion in profit last year. The fact is that the banks gave \$11 billion in bonuses to their executives. It is shameful. The people on that side of the House can do something about this. They can take moneys like that simply by postponing the tax cuts and they can genuinely work to raise seniors above poverty. I believe that is what this House could do. I look forward to the future of this debate because I know it will be going on for some time.

• (1640)

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, over the last couple of years, the member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek was the seniors critic and I was fortunate enough to have him come to my riding.

I want to ask him a question specifically about something in my riding. My riding has been a resourced-based riding. The forestry has taken a huge hit. I met with pensioners who were in their seventies and eighties and they had worked for our forestry company for a number of years. All of a sudden it looked like that particular company was teetering on the brink of some severe financial difficulties. The workers were very concerned about the health of their pension. These were men and women in their seventies and eighties. There was no hope for them to go back to work. We saw that happen with Nortel in Ottawa.

I wonder if the member could comment on what he sees is the importance of doubling CPP, as he so ably outlined, and what it would mean to the men and women in our country when the pension plans that they paid into through their employer are suddenly under threat.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for that question because it is a very important situation that it is happening across the country, in every sector. We have had the things happening with Nortel, we have had problems with the steel workers, and problems in a number of places in this country.

The reality is that workers can wake up one morning and have no pension. Some of the forestry companies forgot the fact that this is workers' money. This money is from deferred wages. This money came as a result of workers saying, “We will forego that next raise if you will start giving us \$1 an hour or whatever toward a pension plan so we can retire in dignity”. Instead, as in the case of Nortel, the company had \$6 billion in assets and \$4 billion in cash, and they did not pay long-term disability to people who were disabled. Their pension plan wound up with a loss of 37%. In my riding there was a

man and a woman who were both in their eighties and both had worked for Nortel. In one day they each lost 37% of their pension.

Things must be done beyond what we are talking about today. There has to be pension insurance and there are a number of things we can do.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my honourable colleague for his very kind words and his important contribution to this debate.

He made reference to the fact that the government is working diligently to undercut the pensions of people in the public sector, the Air Canada employees in the private sector, and certainly Canada Post workers. He made reference to defined benefits and defined contributions. Could he explain to people the difference between those two kinds of plans?

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Speaker, those of us who handle these files tend to talk inside baseball.

A defined benefit is very simple. Employees agree with the employer that money will be set aside jointly. At the end of the day, when employees are about five years before receiving a pension, they can calculate exactly what they would receive each month. If the market happened to take a downturn, the employer is responsible for making up the difference. Thus, one can count on whatever one is entitled to on a monthly basis.

The difference between defined benefit and defined contribution is quite simple. When employee reach that point in time when they are taking their pension, if there is a downturn in the economy that takes 30% or 40% away as we saw recently, then the employees lose that money and the employer does not have to top it up.

Employers will say that this is an unfunded liability. Guess what? If employers had been funding it in the good times, as they should have been, with no contribution holidays, the funds would be there. We would not have the problem that Air Canada or Canada Post or the other American companies are having. These companies are taking advantage of the situation across this country right now, putting Canadian workers out on the streets.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It is my duty pursuant to Standing Order 38 to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands, The Environment; the hon. member for Random—Burin—St. George's, Search and Rescue.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Scarborough—Rouge River.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am privileged to speak to this motion given that over a quarter million seniors are living in poverty today. I also want to articulate the importance of today's youth to be engaged in the dialogue of upholding the standards for today's seniors and for the seniors of the near and distant future.

We are facing crisis today with the number of seniors who are living in poverty. This demands immediate attention. The government has a responsibility to act now to lift every senior out of poverty.

Business of Supply

According to Statistics Canada, almost 300,000 more Ontarians sank into poverty since 2007. Further, Ontario's 17% growth in poverty since 2007 was the highest in the country. Right now, almost 1.7 million Ontarians are living in poverty. There has been an increase in poverty of almost 20% among working-aged adults and a staggering 42% among seniors in Ontario.

I hear the distress and anxiety from my constituents. They are not sure how they are going to pay for the increasing energy and food costs, and the additional taxes on their expenses as a result of the HST.

I remember speaking with an elderly couple who live in the Alton Towers in my riding. They invited me into their home, but they had no heat on. They had one portable space heater that they moved from room to room as they moved. They did not have any of their big lights on in their home. They only had small lamps on. They did not watch TV and had one radio that they used for entertainment. They were doing everything possible, everything they could think of to reduce their consumption in order to reduce their expenditures. I sat with them for about 20 minutes as they went through their bills. They showed me their hydro bills that were consistently getting more and more expensive, and less and less affordable for them with their regular day to day expenses living in the meagre way they were.

Nobody in Canada deserves to be living in these conditions, especially our seniors who have given so much of their lives for us. They have invested into the system for much of their lives only to have to live in such abhorrent conditions. No seniors deserve to be lining up at a food bank in order to feed themselves or to be forced to work well into their retirement years.

Another couple I spoke with on Berner Trail, not too far from where I live, had moved into their modest home as a young couple. They worked very hard and raised their family there. They played by the book and did everything right to be able to enjoy their so-called "golden years". However, now at the ages of 67 and 65, they are looking for work. They are looking for any type of work they can get. The woman is working at the Food Basics by my house as a grocery clerk in order to help pay for their expenses.

A 2009 report on women's poverty from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives stated that low-income rates among senior women remained almost double that of senior men. We know from Statistics Canada that women in Canadian society live longer lives than men.

I am concerned, as everyone in Parliament should be, for all the single senior women in my constituency and in Canada who are going to be left with no choice but to be dependent on food banks and the kindness of local community members. It is very clear from the government's budget that lifting every senior out of poverty is not its priority.

•(1645)

The \$300 million proposed by the government is nice. It sounds like a lot, but it falls short. It sends a clear message about the government's priorities. It would rather give billions of dollars of tax cuts to large corporations, oil companies, big banks or the well-

connected wealthy insiders rather than lift every man and woman who built this country out of poverty.

It is not just the seniors in my constituency who are concerned about the lack of support to lift seniors out of poverty. Many of the working adults, the young families in my constituency, are also worried. They are concerned about how they are going to be able to afford to help their mother or father have a dignified quality of life as their current OAS or GIS payments do not go very far.

Since the financial support is not enough for their parent or parents to live on their own, these young families are bringing their elderly parents into their homes to care for them. The costs of nursing homes or retirement homes are way beyond the reach of the people who live in my constituency. They cannot afford it. They are very concerned about the additional financial stress as family caregivers when they are already just scraping by on their own.

The seniors I spoke with during the morning walking club at the Malvern Mall tell me of their experiences of living with their children. They tell me how they feel like a huge burden on their children and feel guilty about turning to their children for support on all matters. They do not want to be so dependent on their family members but do not really have a choice and spend as much time as possible at the mall so as not to be in the way of their children's lives. They do not want to feel like a burden.

We owe our seniors so much more than this. We owe our seniors so much more than for them to feel like burdens.

We in the NDP proposed a \$700 million increase to the guaranteed income supplement, an investment that would allow our seniors to live a decent quality of life. It would have lifted every senior out of poverty. This support would take the worry off our families and allow our seniors a retirement with dignity and financial security.

However, as we know, the Conservative government has agreed to spend only \$300 million, not even half. Other members in the House have said this is a half measure. It is actually less than a half measure. I guess it is okay for the Conservative government to lift three-sevenths or 40% of seniors out of poverty, or to lift every senior 40% out of poverty. But still 300,000 seniors are living below the poverty line. Once again, we owe our seniors much more than this.

A recent report by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy stated that the increase in senior poverty was largely due to the deteriorating position of single elderly women, whose poverty rate jumped from 14.5% in 2007 to 17.1% in 2008. That was over one year.

The federal old age security, the OAS, and the GIS assure a basic level of income for these seniors. The Conservative government displays a bipolar approach to the help that it provides to Canadian seniors. One of its policies has marginally helped low-income seniors, only 40% of them like I mentioned before, and the other helps the wealthy.

Business of Supply

In their maiden budget in 2005 the Conservatives announced a modest improvement to the GIS for low-income seniors. I thought there might be a glimpse of hope, but very quickly they made a 180 degree turn in the treatment of our seniors by the changes to the tax system.

Some Conservative members across the way speak about their income splitting plans and how good they are. But studies show that pension income splitting does absolutely nothing to help single seniors or even the poorest elderly couples who pay no tax.

• (1650)

Racialized and lower-income youth today have difficulty accessing post-secondary education because of the barriers to education, financially and otherwise. We know that they need good post-secondary education to acquire any type of good job. If our youth today do not get good jobs, they will be unable to save for their future and more and more people will continue to retire in poverty.

• (1655)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my NDP colleague.

We know that the Conservatives want to give tax credits. They have already given a number of tax credits to big corporations, oil companies and banks.

I would like my colleague to talk about how the Conservatives' and the NDP's priorities differ. We know that the Conservatives are going to purchase F-35 jets that will cost billions of dollars. Would it be possible to do something else with that money and to change priorities to help seniors who are living in poverty?

[English]

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Mr. Speaker, that is a very good question. It clearly will help me articulate the difference in the priorities of the NDP, which are to ensure that it is lifting every senior out of poverty, supporting families, investing in health care and education to help all Canadians rather than just oil companies, big banks, buying fighter jets and building prisons. The NDP's priority is to help every family move ahead rather than just well-connected insiders.

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening very carefully to what my friends in the opposition parties have been saying all day today in the House. It is really perplexing to me, as I am sure it is to many members and Canadians right across the country, that our friends in the NDP and the Liberal Party feel that the lower tax plan, which has created over 580,000 jobs in the last couple of years, and the many measures in the budget for seniors are two different things and are totally exclusive. There was no mention whatsoever about the fact that this is the largest GIS increase in decades for seniors. They voted against that. There have been 85,000 taken off the tax rolls.

I am very curious as to why the NDP continues to vote against the measures in our economic action plan from which many Canadians and seniors across the country have benefited. Clearly, on May 2, Canadians gave us the mandate to proceed with the next phase of our economic action plan. In my riding of Richmond Hill the majority of

seniors voted overwhelmingly to support the Conservative Party and the next phase of the economic action plan.

Why does the NDP continue to vote against the very thing that it is speaking about, and that is help for seniors all across Canada?

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan: Mr. Speaker, it is interesting that the member says the Conservatives this time around got a clear mandate when 4.5 million Canadians voted for an NDP government whereas only 4.9 million voted for the Conservatives. Four hundred thousand more Canadians do not make a clear mandate.

The engine behind my campaign in Scarborough—Rouge River was the youth and seniors in my community. They believe in the plan, platform, ideas and principles for which the NDP stands. They know we were the only party that showed a clear commitment to lifting seniors out of poverty. That is why 4.5 million Canadians voted to support the NDP this time around.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonaville—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as we debate the issue within the House, I first want to thank my colleagues for giving me this opportunity. I also thank the preceding speakers. One of the benefits of talking later in the day is the opportunity to collect bits of information from everybody and then try to articulate as best we can.

I have heard some of the debates. I have heard some very off-the-wall comments, certainly about seniors' poverty. I have also heard some comments that deal with topics other than seniors and poverty, as we sometimes get off track here and start talking about those typical lines we use. It seems like some people are still in campaign mode. Nonetheless, it makes the issue very important.

Everybody has that one essential story, or maybe two or three stories, that encapsulates what it is we try to do here, that we ensure that in a country as great as this, the most vulnerable in society do not slip through the cracks. We want to ensure that those people we identify as completely impoverished do not fall through the system, although we know people do. We see them everyday in our positions, whether we are in the bureaucracy or we are in elected office on any of the three levels. Therefore, we come to the House and bring these stories with us. I am glad to hear a lot of those stories coming out today. That is why I congratulate the preceding speakers.

The motion states:

That, in the opinion of the House, ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible, and, therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the Guaranteed Income Supplement sufficiently to achieve that goal.

To lift the vulnerable of our seniors out of poverty requires the payment that is strategically invested in the GIS, that guaranteed income supplement. It is a wonderful piece of machinery, the third pillar of seniors' pay that is so essential across the country. We have the old age security, the Canada pension plan and now the guaranteed income supplement.

Business of Supply

Back in 2005, when I had been elected for only about a year at that point, I remember one of the initiatives we put in place was a strategy for a home heating energy rebate. A lot of people forget that. I have tried to push the government into reconsidering bringing that back. It was in January and it was a heating rebate that was given to recipients of the GIS. For many of the people in my area, and certainly across the country, it allowed people to get over the hump of Christmas and the holiday season, when heating bills are the highest, whether it be through hydro, wood, oil or natural gas.

This is the type of strategic measure that interests me the most because it is one of those initiatives that allows the people who are most vulnerable to stay within their means and in their own homes.

Earlier today, I was talking about a charity that was set up in Toronto and it is called "Share the Warmth". It is a fantastic little charity that provides energy credits for the most vulnerable to avoid homelessness. One of the things it stated was that over the years, the median age of the recipient was getting much higher, say from the 1980s through the 1990s and into this decade.

The baby boomer surge that is running through the system is now making its presence felt here, even in this debate as we talk about the guaranteed income supplement. However, the issue is all the facets of government investing into bringing people out of poverty. The energy rebate is just one. The guaranteed income supplement that seems to be the king we are dealing with is the one measure that is most talked about. It is the one measure that got most of the attention during the campaign simply because it was the one that was most desirable.

Interestingly enough, sometimes when we debate, we get caught up into the minutiae of the language we use. I noticed earlier that, if I am not mistaken and a simple nod from the opposite will suffice, I believe those members are supporting this motion.

However, one of the things the motion says is "ending seniors' poverty is fiscally feasible and therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the guaranteed income supplement". The Conservatives are agreeing with it because they feel they have just gone through this measure.

● (1700)

However, the problem is that every study we have seen puts that dollar value to lift all seniors out of the poverty level at \$700 million, at least. What we witnessed in the budget was less than half of that, which leads us to believe one of two things. First is denial. Second is there is more money coming. I like to think the second option is coming, but I really have my doubts.

I want to congratulate the mover of this motion. This is certainly a good time to have this debate, given the fact that we are now into, as I mentioned earlier, the area of our population growth that is burgeoning, around that age level between 60 and upwards towards 80.

I want to go back to couple of other issues. Two years ago I brought a private member's bill to the House. What I noticed was a lot of seniors were very worried, not just about the amount of money that was available, but their ability to budget.

I spoke to a group in Newfoundland and Labrador. It was the umbrella organization for all the seniors' groups. We had a very interesting meeting about the things that seniors needed, those certain measures, those small investments that would make a big difference in the lives of a seniors.

They talked about new horizons, educating them for computer training, allowing them to download pictures of the grandkids, allowing them to take the bus, discounts, whether it be tax credits or not, but discounts were a big one, and payment of utilities. For instance, if people lose a connection to the basic utilities, the reconnection fee is incredibly expensive. Therefore, seniors were looking for major discounts or even a wiping out of the reconnection fees for those who had reached a certain age. I thought that was a great idea, and it is something with which the government could get involved.

The other issue was that every senior, whether he or she was receiving CPP, old age security or guaranteed income supplement, gets paid once a month. Seniors told me that without an increase, they would like to have the option of bi-weekly payments.

We brought in a private member's bill. Now I have heard the government does not support that as of today. I hope, at some point down the road, it will support it. This is one of the greatest listening exercises that we can engage in, and that is with the most vulnerable in society and certainly for seniors who are most vulnerable.

In my riding of 193 communities, the median age is around 56. Therefore, to say that this issue means a lot to me in my position is probably the understatement of the day, certainly by me.

I think about the people in my riding and about all that I have gone through, all that I have seen, all that I have witnessed. People are in desperate need and do not know where to go. We have become the place, whether it is at the federal level or the provincial level, where the most desperate come to, yet we are locked into these departments and these payment programs. We cannot do anything because we would have to change the legislation.

A lot of the seniors in my area are turning to the churches as an act of desperation. To be quite honest, the churches are doing good work to ensure these people are connected to the avenues by which they are able to receive help. I have been here seven years and in the past four years the churches in my area, the Salvation Army, the Catholic church and the Pentecostal assemblies, have been on the forefront of providing the most basic assistance.

What is wrong with that picture? The picture shows that we need to get out there more. We need to have a debate that is germane to the situation, something that is relevant, something that is tangible to the most vulnerable seniors.

If there is one thing I noticed in the past while, it is we just have not become tangible to seniors as a place for help, assistance and information. However, at least with motions like this, we can go a long way to alleviating that.

Business of Supply

• (1705)

I hope that through programs like the GIS, CPP and OAS we will be able to do a lot more, but the very basic issue is that \$700 million investment to bring that large bulk of people out of the poverty level. That is what has been agreed upon, but for some reason we get caught up in the argument of whether that is enough or this is enough, if this is the right number and that is not. I have heard many people say that the money is not available so therefore we have to be more prudent.

That was last year's excuse. This year all of a sudden it becomes a good thing to do. I heard many government members today say that we just had an election which therefore delayed the payment of the \$300 million. If the \$300 million meant so much to the government today or before the election, why did it not do this four years ago?

The Conservatives have been in power since 2006. There was a time when there was no recession. When they came into power in 2006 I remember quite well that we were flush with a surplus. We were able to forecast surpluses out for a good six or seven years. Then things turned south. Yet at the time just before the recession hit that \$300 million was never mentioned.

At least all members of the House have pushed the point. I will not be specific to any particular party, but we feel the need for raising our most vulnerable out of the poverty level as I mentioned earlier.

Just poring over some of the facts when we talk about pension plans, two years ago the largest employer in my riding at the time was AbitibiBowater, a mill that existed for over 100 years. It had what was called the direct benefit plan. Quite frankly, with the closure of the mill last year, that plan is sustaining a large part of the community in which I live. That is right. That DB plan that people villainized is sustaining communities as we speak. Would a direct contribution plan do that much for the most vulnerable communities? There is not a chance.

The world is changing. Finances are changing. Companies are moving away from this. We cannot legislate them to go back. Nonetheless, as government, we have that responsibility to step in and give people choices.

In that particular situation, the solvency ratio was poor with AbitibiBowater. Two years ago it was at 71%. Trouble was ahead. Had it closed out, wound up that account, people would have ended up with 71% of their pension, which still was only a fraction of what they were earning when they were working full-time. It would have been devastating. It has rebounded somewhat, but what can we do to fix that?

We can make better laws. One of my colleagues in the NDP brought in Bill C-501, An Act to amend the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act (termination and severance pay). The bill itself had some problems, but it had a great principle in mind, which was that the most vulnerable should line up to get attention first.

The companies pay a whole assortment of people when they finish, yet the most vulnerable always end up on the bottom part of that formula. We have to work to get that the other way around and we can do that with the right discussion, the right debate and the right legislation. It is time for all members in the House, from

whatever party colour one wishes to put out there, it is a decent debate to be had. The most vulnerable would be the recipients of what it is we are paid to do, which is to discuss, debate and enact.

Some of the statistics we heard earlier today are that upwards of over 70% of the people do not have a pension outside of what is guaranteed through the old age security and the guaranteed income supplement. It is a staggering figure.

One of the issues that I brought up earlier, which we brought up during the campaign and one that I think is a good idea was discussed ad nauseam in Great Britain about a decade ago. It is called a supplementary CPP.

• (1710)

It is the component of a voluntary payment to top up people's CPP to allow them to receive greater payments once they reach the age of 65, or 60, if they choose to do so.

However, the one element of that supplemental CPP that I thought was very important in the changing dynamics of this world, of this country and of our communities, is the fact that it was a portable mechanism for taking a pension that is not vested into one entity, not one company, but people could take it with them as they travelled throughout their working career. No matter what company people went with they could take this pension they have invested in and move it with them.

When I fly back and forth from Newfoundland to Ottawa, there are a tremendous amount of people I see each and every week, or biweekly, who go to the oil fields, primarily in Alberta, some in Saskatchewan. I worry. They make good salaries, but where they do invest for their future, for their retirement? It is all over the place, I am not really sure and I am very worried about it. If we do not worry about these things, we will find that our children and grandchildren will have to deal with that discrepancy much like we are dealing with now.

Will direct benefit plans exist at that point? I really have my doubts. As much as I do not want to say it, it looks like it just might happen that way, given the current trends toward direct contribution. I have no great qualms with RRSPs, RRIFs and these type of investments, but the issue is that it does not always provide that steady income that we think it is going to provide.

I would implore anyone to see a financial advisor. I have never been an insurance salesman and I am not the one to advocate for the industry, but I have talked to financial advisors and they provide good advice. However, not everybody does that. So, we have GIS and old age security. That is the backdrop, that is the very backbone by which people have to survive if they have nothing else to rely on.

Business of Supply

Why can we not provide that bar, why can we not reach the bar that was set to bring everybody, virtually all these people, out of the poverty level? That is what the \$700 million is about. It is not just a round number that is pulled out of the air, as was insinuated by some people in the House. It is a number that represents the greatest investment in impoverished seniors in this country probably in the last 50 years, because we have that responsibility. It does not matter if people line themselves up with a particular ideology. We have to admit that if people are poor, if they are vulnerable and if they are desperate, where is their ideology then? It means absolutely nothing. If that happens, if more people fall below that line, then we, as parliamentarians, squandered a fantastic opportunity to invest in the most vulnerable. As members will recall, the most vulnerable of seniors invested in us many years ago.

How many people in this House can actually say that they are here inspired by our seniors today? Everyone can. Who cannot? No matter whether they are uncles, aunts, mothers, fathers, grandparents, friends, next-door neighbours. Do we not owe them, at the very least, an investment in the basic income support of that \$700 million, not \$100 million, not \$300 million, but \$700 million? That is the story behind this \$700 million investment. That is why I support this motion. That is why we need to have more debates on motions just like this.

• (1715)

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague's speech was very focused and well thought out.

I noted that there are programs to help wipe out the reconnection fees that many individuals who are seniors and those who are impoverished have to face. Would it not be great if we actually had a system in place like the GIS or OAS that provided enough income for seniors so that they would not have to worry about making their monthly payments? They are missing payments right now because they do not get enough money.

Too many seniors are come into my office holding their hydro or heating bill in one hand, but say that they need money in the other hand to buy food. They have to make those choices. In our economy, in our country, that is uncalled for. I would like to hear the member's comments on that.

• (1720)

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague from Sudbury and I share the same attitude and he brings up a valid point.

How does that happen to people who worked all their life, garnered wealth, raised children, afforded a home and a car or two? There are so many people in that middle income bracket who find themselves not able to afford the basic utilities. How does it happen that people who are secure at a point in their lives becomes vulnerable?

The difference between going from comfortable to vulnerable can be very thin. We see it every day. For people who get serious diseases, drug coverage can be crippling. It is astounding how much is being paid for just basic drugs these days.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I always enjoy the interventions from the member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor and I thank him for his contribution to the debate today.

The member asked a rhetorical question. He asked why we did not get these measures for seniors four years ago when we first became government.

I would like to remind him that the reason it did not happen earlier is because we were busy employing other measures. For example, there was a total of \$2.3 billion in targeted tax measures that took about 85,000 seniors off the tax rolls, we doubled the pension income credit, reduced the minimum registered retirement income fund withdrawal by 25%, increased the age limit for registered retirement savings plans and so on. Those are measures of about \$2.3 billion to help seniors. The measure that the member is talking about will help about 680,000 of our most vulnerable seniors. When he asked why we did not get this done four years ago, I think that is a plausible answer.

I would like to ask the member why, 13 years prior when the Liberal Party, his party, was in power it did not get it done? This increase in the GIS that we put forward in budget 2011 is actually the largest increase in 25 years. Perhaps the member could address why Liberals did not get it done?

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, I cannot deny the fact that the increases were there back then as well, but if he wants to brag about the fact this is the largest one in 25 years, I will concede the point.

Since the member brought up the targeted measures of over \$2 billion, some of the measures he spoke of basically provide a small measure of comfort across the middle class level but do not dig down deep enough into what one would call the most impoverished within our society.

I will give him credit that this is the largest increase in 25 years, there is no doubt about it. Instead of condemning what has been done, I will raise the bar. Perhaps I was too hasty to say that the government should have done it before because it seems to be a political quip that we use too much. Therefore, I will credit his government for the \$300 million increase and I will raise him another \$400 million.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the status of women has been a priority for me for over 30 years, not only because I am a woman, but also because we are talking about at least half our population. In Quebec, for seniors living in low-income housing—I am talking about Quebec because that is where I live—as soon as they get the slightest little increase, 25% of that increase goes toward the increase in their rent. If a person gets an extra \$600, then 25% of that amount goes toward his or her cost of housing. That does not leave much for groceries or personal items.

Again, women are the poorest because often, women who are in their 40s or 50s today will be taking care of their aged parents. They will leave their jobs and sometimes lose their jobs. They will end up poor when they retire because they will not have worked long enough to accumulate a respectable income to have a decent retirement. I want to see this motion adopted.

Business of Supply

• (1725)

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, this issue is very important for Newfoundland and Labrador and also for Quebec.

[English]

The member brings up a good point. The most vulnerable would be women in that age group.

I just dealt with a situation last week involving a woman who had to take care of her ailing parents. The only income support she had was through government means at a very low level.

Some people save RRSPs and when they withdraw from their RRSPs, their old age security and GIS are decreased. It seems like we have put ourselves in a situation where people in one lot improve themselves but people in the other lot do not.

The reason why I bring this up is because it seems that women are most vulnerable in this situation. They are predominantly the caregivers, at least for parents in the riding I am from. As a result of that, the most vulnerable get looked over very quickly. They are not as loud as others. In many cases, they are left on the hook to look after their parents in a very vulnerable situation.

The parents could have incredibly large drug expenses or incredibly large housing expenses. There is no housing available in communities that are isolated. They stay in the home that they have lived in for 50 years. It is not easy to heat these large homes. When the parents do not have the ability to heat these buildings, the responsibility falls on the children and the children in this particular situation cannot go to government agencies because they just do not qualify. The most important thing we should do goes back to the very motion we are debating today, and that is provide a level of income support to the people who actually own the home and the most vulnerable, those seniors.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a quick question so the record is clear to me and I did not misunderstand anything that the member said. He said \$700 million would be sufficient to bring all seniors out of poverty. Is that his accurate statement? The reason I ask is because our costing is about \$2 billion, so we see a discrepancy in costing of about \$1.3 billion. I just want to clarify that for the record. I wonder if the member could speak to that. Is he sufficiently satisfied that \$700 million would bring all seniors out of poverty?

Mr. Scott Simms: Mr. Speaker, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives puts it a shade over \$1 billion. Other groups, certainly labour groups, have put it at about \$750 million. Either number is nowhere near the \$2 billion that I am hearing from the other side. Therefore, I will stick to my original intent which is to say that I will take \$700 million over \$300 million any day.

• (1730)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my esteemed colleague from Sudbury.

The primary role of Canada's retirement income system is to provide older Canadians with adequate and stable income in retirement. All of us together in this House cannot absolutely abandon our seniors who worked hard to build this country, so I am urging everyone to support this motion.

Ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible and the government can take immediate steps to increase the GIS sufficiently to achieve that goal. It is feasible for the government to lift every single Canadian out of poverty. It just requires a will to do so.

One senior living in poverty is one too many, yet we have hundreds of thousands of seniors struggling to make ends meet. The low-income rate is considerably higher, as we have heard from other members, for unattached seniors. Single seniors are more likely to experience low-income, and senior women living on their own are more likely than their male counterparts to live in poverty. As members all know, women also tend to live longer so we spend a longer time in poverty.

The average before tax income for seniors living in poverty ranges from \$14,700 to \$22,000. For singles, the average before tax income ranges from \$11,550 to \$16,900. I would challenge every member in this House to build a budget that would cover rent, utilities, food, and transportation, and then see if there is one penny left over to visit friends for a cup of coffee.

Of those who fall into the poverty bracket, seniors are the least likely of all age groups to move back out of it. Once in the poverty frame, they tend to spend the rest of their lives in that frame. And let me say that even if they go to work at Tim Hortons or anywhere else where they can get a few hours of work, they are still living in poverty.

Being in a low-income bracket on a continuous and ongoing basis has negative implications that go way beyond not being able to make ends meet. It has implications on one's health. It has implications on how long one will live. It has implications on one's quality of life. And we know that it has an effect on how seniors begin to view themselves. It lowers their self-esteem.

Our seniors are victims of systemic poverty and that systemic poverty can only be addressed by people sitting in this esteemed House. I would urge all of us to do so.

From 2003 to 2007, one in six seniors, which is 16%, was in the persistently low-income group over the whole period. Shame on us. The most vulnerable in the group, of course, are senior women. Women make up about 70% of poor seniors. This motion will directly help senior women living in poverty, and in particular some of the most vulnerable in our society, our aboriginal women.

Poverty among seniors has a crippling effect on visible minorities as well. In 2010, based on the census, 65% of single visible minority seniors were considered low-income seniors compared to 39% of single seniors who were not a visible minority. We have to and we can address this. Among couples, the low-income rate was 15.7% for visible minorities. Once again, shame on us.

Business of Supply

My riding of Newton—North Delta is a wonderfully culturally diverse one and these figures are particularly concerning to the aging people in our community. We have seniors who, even though they qualified to become Canadian citizens, do not qualify to receive pensions because they happen to come from particular countries. Those seniors are living well below the poverty line, totally dependent on their children. One can imagine how those seniors feel, at 75 or 80 years of age, having to live like that.

● (1735)

The OECD reported that OAS plus GIS bring households to about 90% of the poverty thresholds they have calculated for Canada. The government can raise the GIS to the after tax low-income cutoff and it has the budget to do so. It just needs the will. I urge colleagues sitting across the way that as they go to sleep tonight, they find the will to do so.

The budget provides for a federal policy framework for the aerospace industry, billions of dollars, but not a comprehensive approach to poverty. Even the increase to the guaranteed income supplement is only \$50 to \$70 extra a month for our poorest seniors. It is just not enough.

Activity limitations are among the most important factors affecting a person's quality of life and the possibility of full participation in our society. We all value our independence. It is an important concern for seniors. It implies the ability to perform daily activities for oneself. Research has shown a strong positive relationship between self-perceived health and the potential to carry out daily activities without limitation or dependence on others. When I talk about dependency and independence, I am talking about financial independence as well because financial dependence can be just as crippling as physical dependence on someone else.

There are indeed indications that dependence on others actually reduces the quality of life and there is research to support that. Canadian seniors deserve independence. I know that is what I would want for myself and if I want that for me, my parents and grandparents, then every single Canadian deserves the same.

Our seniors are not asking for a lot. Countless times, as I canvassed door-to-door, seniors told me their heart-rending stories. One of them actually said to me, "All I want to be able to do is pay my bills and just have a little left over so I can buy a small gift for my grandson". That story made me cry and I thought what a terrible state we had forced our seniors citizens into.

While visiting a seniors' home in my riding, an elderly gentleman said that after he had paid for his assisted living, he did not even have enough money left to go out for a cup of coffee. Another senior couple told me that they have a beautiful car sitting in the driveway, that they can now no longer afford to fill it with gas to visit their members and friends, and they are feeling lonelier and more isolated every day. We can do this.

Armine Yalnizyan from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives stated:

In a nation as affluent as ours, seniors' poverty doesn't have to exist at all. Based on what seniors already get out of public policy, we can afford to help. We don't have to spend more. We just have to spend it differently.

She went on to say we have to take money from one part of the budget and reallocate it.

The motion put forward by the member for London—Fanshawe targets the most vulnerable seniors in our country. If the budget passes as is, the additional money will not bring seniors out of poverty. The government measures will not lift even half of the seniors out of poverty. There are hundreds and thousands of seniors living in poverty and we need to help them today.

This motion is about dignity. This motion is about independence. This motion is about quality of life. If we can lift every Canadian senior out of poverty, let us do it. My appeal is to colleagues in the House, every single one of us. Let us not abandon our seniors. Let us work together now and lift seniors out of poverty. Together we can do it. They need us and are counting on us. Let us make sure we deliver.

● (1740)

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government is not insensitive to seniors. As a brand new member of Parliament, I want to assure everyone that when I campaigned, seniors' issues were first and foremost.

As a result of actions by the Conservative government since 2006, seniors and pensioners will receive about \$2.3 billion in additional targeted tax relief in 2011-12. This includes increasing the age credit by \$1,000 twice, benefiting 2.2 million seniors, doubling the pension income credit to \$2,000, introducing pension income splitting, and increasing the age limit for the registered retirement savings plan from 69 to 71 years of age.

I would ask the member opposite, why have none of these initiatives been supported by her party?.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, this is not about a litany of things we have done. This is about what our seniors need today. I could say he did this, she did that or they did that. I do not want to go there. We are giving billions of dollars to banks and big corporations in tax breaks, which have already had lots of those, and yet we do not say that we do not have the money to do that. We are giving billions of dollars to oil companies, which made the biggest profits last year, and we are not saying that we do not have the money. Yet when it comes to our most vulnerable citizens, the ones who built this country, we are bringing up history books.

Colleagues, let us turn our heads to what really matters. These are citizens who are struggling and who are counting on us. Do not turn your back on our own parents and grandparents, their friends and others like them who built this country. Vote yes and vote for our seniors citizens.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we continue to the next question or comment, just a subtle reminder to members to address their comments to the Chair, to the Speaker. That keeps our discussions in a good vein.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor.

Business of Supply

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I want to commend the hon. member, because I like the juxtaposition between the two elements here, the corporate tax breaks and the GIS. I did not bring it up in my speech because I felt that it had probably been used way too much, but I think the member pointed me in the right direction. Maybe we should talk about it, because when it comes to corporate tax cuts, it has always seemingly been a race to the bottom: Who can deliver the lowest tax cut in a particular jurisdiction. I believe Ireland had the same of attitude, and we know how that worked out.

I want the hon. member to comment on that, because I want her to discuss how priorities are what are at stake here and not the exact numbers. That is what that \$700 million means: It is a priority investment in the impoverished.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, it absolutely is about priorities. That is why we are here.

Canadians elect us as parliamentarians because they trust us to come here and look after their interests. If we do not pay attention to priorities and to what Canadians value, then we betray that trust.

Right now we are betraying hundreds and thousands of seniors who built this province. My mother is close to 84. I see other senior citizens who are struggling. At the same time they are struggling to put food on their tables and pay their bills, we continue to race to the bottom, to give the most money to the biggest corporations, the biggest banks and biggest oil companies, that are making the biggest profits in our history. Why? Because it is about priorities.

I often hear my esteemed colleagues across the aisle talk about the value of families. Well, our seniors are members of our families. If they are members of our families and Canadians are a family, then we have to look after our senior citizens.

Please, I urge all hon. members to vote yes and let us say we are about families and mean it.

• (1745)

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise today and speak in the House. I hope the Speaker will indulge me for one minute, as this is my first speech in the House, although I have been up many times to ask questions since the House resumed.

I would just like to take a minute to say thanks to the folks in my great riding of Sudbury. I like to round numbers up, so that even if it was 49.9% of the vote that I received, I will say that 50% of the electorate saw fit to put me back in this fantastic place and to be their voice. I want to thank them for that, but ultimately and truly I have to thank my family: my wife Yolanda; my daughter Trinity who is seven; and my daughter Thea who is three. Both of them were great billboards for me during the last election. Also, I would like to thank my father. He is 97 years old. He was 56 when I was born, and so seniors' issues have always been near and dear to my heart. Also, I do have to mention my mother. Although she passed away a year and a half ago, she is always in my heart and reminds me of issues that we need to talk about in this House.

With that, I would like to reflect on what we are talking about today. I look at the motion:

That, in the opinion of this House, ending seniors' poverty in Canada is fiscally feasible, and, therefore, the House calls on the government to take immediate steps to increase the Guaranteed Income Supplement sufficiently to achieve that goal.

I think the important word there is sufficiently". We need to ensure that when we are talking about ending seniors' poverty, we are not talking about a little off here and a little off there. What is needed right now is \$700 million to take every single senior in our country out of poverty, and it can be done. It truly can be done. If we are looking at the priorities the government is bringing forward right now, we could easily find \$700 million to ensure every single senior gets out of poverty.

The first one that comes to mind for me is the corporate tax cuts. My colleague talked earlier about how we have talked about this ad nauseam at some points. However, when the banks made \$20 billion in profits last year and we are giving them \$840 million in tax breaks, we could take every single senior out of poverty with the latter and have \$140 million left to look at other issues of poverty. We need to start putting our priorities in the right place. Canadians and Canadian seniors should be at the top of our priority list. Right now, if we are looking at gaps, we can see that poverty among seniors particularly affects minorities and women.

In 2000, based on the census, 65% of single visible-minority seniors were considered to have low incomes compared to 39% of single seniors who were not. Among couples, the low-income rate was 15.7% for visible minorities and only 5.6% for the rest. The rate of poverty among female seniors is double the rate of male poverty.

Unfortunately, I can think of too many times when I was going door to door this last election and over the two and a half years prior to that when I had single female seniors coming into my office or talking to me at the door about how proud they were that they were able to work and to do something for their children and grandchildren, but that over the last six months to a year life had become completely unaffordable for them. That is when the tears started to well up in their eyes.

I know every single one of us, no matter what colour our tie is, no matter what party we come from, has had those conversations with seniors. Each and every one of us wants to do what is right for these seniors. What is right is ensuring we can find that \$700 million to take every single senior out of poverty. There is no reason that a senior citizen has to choose between eating and rent, between paying a bill and having a home to live in. If that is the kind of country we are letting our seniors face, it is absolutely shameful.

As I mentioned earlier, my father is 97 years old. I come from a different background in terms of family heritage, because I have seen the work my family has done in building our great country and contributing to the economy. That goes right across our country.

Business of Supply

● (1750)

What does that say about where we are going, if we overlook and deny seniors the right to live and retire in dignity? If they are having to contemplate buying dog or cat food to get protein, that is not retiring in dignity. We need to ensure that seniors are living above the poverty line. We parliamentarians can do that.

One of the files I have been working on over the last two and a half years is credit card interest rates and credit card debt. Seniors, unfortunately, are falling into that cycle, because they do not have enough to survive on right now. They are taking from Peter to give to Paul. Hopefully, I have not offended any Peters or Pauls in making that statement.

What these seniors are doing is that they are actually taking money they do not necessarily have, using it put food on their table or to pay a bill, and then make a minimum payment so they can get through that month. That is sad because slowly the credit card companies are inching their way and starting to take away what little income they have.

I have had thousands of emails from families and seniors, people right across the country, about what these credit card companies are doing. Let me just reiterate, if a senior makes \$18,000 a year in pension, he or she should not qualify for a credit card with a \$30,000 limit. That is what the credit card companies are giving to some of these seniors. If the seniors say no to them, then they lose the right to have that access.

What ends up happening is that seniors use the credit cards to survive or to buy their grandchildren a gift or, but most of the time it is to put food on their table. The credit card companies are now coming in and taking away property, taking away things, because these seniors have had to use credit cards to survive. That is shameful.

Once again, let us establish a system to ensure that no senior lives below the poverty line.

One of the things that seniors actually have to spend their money on is medications. What we as New Democrats have been talking about for a long time is the creation of a national pharmacare program. If we establish this to lower the costs of medication and to equalize the availability of prescription drugs for seniors across the country, they would have more money in their pocket. More money in their pocket would allow them to actually buy the gifts, put food on their table, whatever they needed to do with their money.

Right now we are not seeing that. We are not even seeing the government contemplating such a program. We would like to encourage the government to look at that, because such a system would actually save Canadians billions of dollars on an annual basis, as the strains on our hospital system and family doctors created by the lack of access to affordable prescriptions would be alleviated.

What we are seeing right now are the priorities of the government. We talked about the corporate tax cuts and seniors struggling to get by. I think seniors see this as more insult to injury.

We have heard about the billions being spent on unnecessary fighter jets. We do not even know the full cost of each yet. I think two or three of those fighter jets would absolutely take every single

senior in this country out of poverty. It goes right back to what our priorities are.

A \$700 million investment, I think, would be the first investment, the first step that we need to make to ensure that seniors are out of poverty or above the poverty line. It would go a long way toward ensuring that we as parliamentarians recognized and respected the work that our seniors have done for our country.

I do not think any one of us will ever forget our seniors and the great work they do.

[*Translation*]

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his speech. I appreciate his feeling of gratitude, which he expressed so well. It is good for all Parliamentarians to hear.

● (1755)

[*English*]

I have a question arising from the member's speech and the preceding one. Many times we have heard from the opposition benches about the tax breaks we are giving corporations, those job-creators that have propelled us to the number one place in the western world in terms of economic recovery.

I would like the members to make the distinction between giving money to job-creators and not taking away money by increasing taxes. It is the low tax regime that has attracted many of these investors and allowed us to create some 570,000 or more jobs since July 2009. There is a difference.

I would like the member opposite to acknowledge that difference, if he will.

Mr. Glenn Thibeault: Mr. Speaker, I helped the member's economy this past weekend because I visited West Vancouver when I was at the convention.

In relation to the member's question about corporate tax cuts, I think my hon. colleague missed the fact that we are talking about priorities here and our priorities are ensuring that Canadian seniors do not live in poverty.

We can put it any way we like. We can say it is giving, it is a decision or it is an implementation but at the end of the day the big banks paid \$840 million less. They made \$20 billion in profits. What we are saying is that the banks should not be given corporate tax breaks. Seniors should be give \$700 million to get them out of poverty. Let us move on with solving poverty right across the country.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I was very moved by the speech by the hon. member for Sudbury.

Business of Supply

The member spoke about pharmaceutical drugs and their prices. Has the official opposition looked at the efficacy and the inadequacies of registration for prescription drugs. Recently it was drawn to my attention, through a therapeutics initiative in British Columbia, that 150,000 North Americans die every year using prescription drugs as prescribed, that we are not using enough of an evidence-based approach and that we should be concerned about seniors being overmedicated.

I wonder if the hon. member has a view on this.

Mr. Glenn Thibeault: Mr. Speaker, in relation to the specifics, it would be best to defer that to the critic for health in our party.

However, in relation to overmedication of seniors and some of the problems that we are seeing when it relates to seniors, I believe one of our colleagues from the Conservative bench wrote a book about the subject. I have also had the opportunity of working in the field of supporting individuals with developmental handicaps who were also seniors. What we have seen in many instances is overmedication and the over-medication results in them going to the hospital.

I spoke earlier about those costs and the implication that those costs have on our health care system. If we actually had a national pharmacare program, those dollars could be saved so that we could ensure that seniors have more money in their pockets, because that is the motion that we are speaking to today.

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I know the member for Sudbury also comes from a city where often the people in his community are reliant upon a resource-based industry. In my own riding of Nanaimo—Cowichan, forestry is an important part of our economy, or it has been up until the last few years.

I wonder if he would comment on the fact that we see many of these private sector pensions being under attack as companies go into bankruptcy and what he sees as the important role for government on that.

Mr. Glenn Thibeault: Mr. Speaker, in Sudbury, we had one of the most devastating strikes in, I think, our country's history where we had Vale and Local 6500 on strike for a year, most of it over defined benefits and defined pensions.

It is one of those things that we need to start prioritizing. We keep using that word on this side of the House but prioritizing to ensure that our seniors have the opportunity to retire in dignity. There are too many seniors right now actually having to go back to work underground because their pensions are inadequate. That is shameful.

* * *

● (1800)

POINTS OF ORDER

MARITIME HELICOPTERS

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Public Works and Government Services and Minister for Status of Women, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. Earlier today, I noted that Sikorsky had confirmed that it is on track to deliver 28 fully functional maritime helicopters on schedule starting in June this year.

To be clear, Sikorsky has confirmed that it is on track to deliver the 28 fully functional maritime helicopters on schedule starting in June 2012.

* * *

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—SENIORS' POVERTY

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Hon. Alice Wong (Minister of State (Seniors), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will address the issue raised by the hon. member of London—Fanshawe in regard to ending seniors' poverty.

As the hon. Minister of State for seniors, I am pleased to say that we have already taken action to address this serious issue in budget 2011. That is why we will support this motion today.

The hon. member suggests that we increase the guaranteed income supplement. We have increased the guaranteed income supplement in budget 2011, which we tabled earlier this month.

I would also like to correct the member on some other facts.

With the strong mandate the Canadians have given us, we are using the next phase of the economic action plan to not only enhance the GIS but also the new horizons for seniors program.

We are also working for seniors to ensure the strength of the retirement income system by introducing a new family caregiver tax credit. In fact, when asked about these measures, CARP's vice-president of advocacy said that its members were, "happy" and "thrilled that these issues—are being mentioned" in the budget.

I would like to go back and discuss the issue, which, in my opinion, is the most important news for seniors in budget 2011, the boost to the guaranteed income supplement. This increase will directly help those seniors who rely exclusively or almost exclusively on federal benefits. This includes many senior women and singles with inadequate incomes.

Budget 2011 measures will provide a new annual top-up benefit of up to \$600 for single seniors and \$840 for couples. This will improve the financial security of more than 680,000 seniors across Canada. It will help the most vulnerable seniors. This is a significant investment into our seniors population despite the government's tight fiscal situation that will see us balance our budget by fiscal year 2014-15.

However, do not take my word for it. Let us hear what some key stakeholders have to say about our 2011 budget commitments following the initial tabling of the budget.

The C.D. Howe Institute said:

...the new Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) top-up benefit for low-income seniors, would bring a meaningful increase in benefits too low-income seniors.

Both the Service Employees International Union and the Canadian Labour Congress stated in press releases that the guaranteed income supplement increase "is a win for every senior living in poverty in Canada".

We are providing the largest GIS increase in a quarter century to the lowest income seniors who need it most. This makes sense.

Business of Supply

However, the GIS increase is only one of the many ways our government is helping seniors preserve their standards of living.

Canada's seniors have worked hard to build a better country and our government believes they deserve a secure and dignified retirement.

Furthermore, Canadians are living longer, healthier lives than people in past generations. Therefore, helping Canadians prepare for and achieve financial security in their later years is a priority of our government.

It goes back to the very beginning of our mandate when we created the portfolio of minister for seniors so that older people could have a stronger voice at the cabinet table.

Since 2007, our government has made life better for Canadian seniors through a number of programs and initiatives. In fact, it was our government who introduced pension income splitting and doubled the pension income credit. We have lowered taxes and removed 85,000 seniors from the tax rolls completely. We also raised the GIS exemption, putting more money in the pockets of 1.6 million more seniors.

What did the opposition do? It voted against all of those measures. If the opposition truly intends to help seniors, it would have voted for our budget.

Speaking of the next phase of Canada's economic action plan, we will do even more.

●(1805)

As minister for seniors, I am happy to say that budget 2011 has good news for older Canadians. In budget 2011, we introduced new measures to improve the financial security of Canada's seniors, to expand their opportunities and to enhance their quality of life.

I have already mentioned that Canadians are living longer than people in past generations and they are naturally concerned about financial security after they retire.

It is important to point out that we have a strong public pension system. This year, Canadian's will receive \$70 billion in benefits through the Canada pension plan, old age security and the guaranteed income supplement, or what we call GIS. Over the years, GIS has been a major factor in reducing poverty among Canadian seniors but it is not the only factor and it is not the only area where we are making things better.

Our government also wants to improve federally regulated private pension plans. We are now working with the provinces to introduce new private pension options, such as the pooled registered pension plan. These plans would benefit millions of Canadians who have not had access to this kind of coverage before, such as employees of small and medium-sized businesses and self-employed workers.

We are helping seniors hang on to more of their hard-earned money. As a result of measures introduced by this government, seniors and pensioners will receive about \$2.3 billion in targeted tax relief in the 2011-12 fiscal year.

There are many seniors who are not quite ready to draw a pension. The National Seniors Council has found that many seniors are

staying on the job where they continue to share their wealth of knowledge and experience. For those seniors who want to keep working, we are changing the rules to eliminate the mandatory retirement age for most federally regulated employees.

We are also extending the targeted initiative for older workers for another two years. This initiative helps older workers who have been laid off from their jobs to retrain for new careers.

All of those measures are helping seniors financially. They are all anti-poverty measures. In fact, the incidence of poverty among seniors in Canada has dropped from a rate of 21% in 1980 to less than 6% in 2008. That is one of the lowest rates in the world.

That is not all. The next phase of Canada's economic action plan builds on commitments to seniors made in previous budgets. These commitments include \$13 million over three years in budget 2008 to help combat elder abuse, of which the most prevalent form is financial abuse. By helping seniors protect themselves from financial abuse, we are protecting their incomes and savings, and that is an anti-poverty measure.

In a previous budget, we also committed \$400 million over two years for the construction of new housing units for low income seniors, and that is an anti-poverty measure because it allows older people to find decent homes at a rent they can afford.

We are also introducing general measures to help Canadian families financially that will also benefit seniors.

Caring for an infirm dependent relative can be really expensive. That is why we are introducing a new family caregiver tax credit. In addition, we are removing the limit on the amount of eligible expenses that caregivers can claim under the medical expense tax credit in regard to their financially dependent relatives. For the first time, the definition of caregiver has been expanded to include spouses and common-law partners. Many seniors are acting as caregivers and these measures will relieve some of their burden.

Seniors are also major beneficiaries of the broad-based tax relief measures that our government has introduced and other financial measures, such as the tax free savings account.

Again I would like to point out to members of the House that these measures are directly or indirectly anti-poverty measures.

The interests of older Canadians are becoming more important as seniors make up an increasingly larger proportion of our population.

Financial security is obviously important to seniors, as it is to all Canadians. It is essential to meeting the challenges and enjoying the opportunities that come with getting older. Our government will continue to do its part to ensure that security.

●(1810)

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was interested in some of the things my colleague said, so I have two questions.

*Adjournment Proceedings***ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS**

First, if the budget of the government is so tight, if it is so concerned about measures to reduce spending, why is it still giving corporate tax cuts to profitable corporations? Why is there \$840 million for the banks and \$35 billion for jets built in the United States, but only \$1.65 a day for a single senior?

Second, if she thinks that expanded pensions are so good, that this private pooled pension is so great, then why not expand the CPP and make it adequate so people can have a decent and dignified retirement?

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, the most important thing is to speak to the seniors directly and also speak to the major stakeholders.

I am happy to report to the House that I have already spoken to the vice-president of CARP and had a meaningful conversation. In fact, I will be meeting her soon in Toronto, face to face, to listen to her client's voices.

I am also very proud to report to the House that I have already met seniors face to face. I have spoken to the stakeholders in B.C. over the past few days. I look forward to meeting the president of the National Seniors Council later this week. As well, I look forward to meeting the ministers from the provinces and territories for seniors. We will definitely come to very good solutions to better improve the lives of seniors.

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there was a very serious issue that affected senior's income not long ago. For those senior citizens who decide to withdraw their registered retirement income funds to respond to a housing crisis, emergency home repairs, emergency medical assistance, or anything else, the government decided on May 17, 2010 that they would lose their GIS benefits. Consequentially, they would also lose their drug cards and other provincial benefits tied to the GIS.

When this was brought to the floor of the House, the government said that it would amend its decision and prevent that from happening. This required a change to the Old Age Security Act.

Will the minister of state commit today that her government will immediately bring in amendments to the Old Age Security Act to ensure that senior citizens, should they withdraw their RRIFs, would not lose their GIS benefits as a result of a loss of optioning?

Hon. Alice Wong: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of National Revenue has already addressed the issue, so I will not comment further on it.

However, I will be meeting the provincial and territorial ministers at the end of this month. We will be discussing a lot of issues that will be related directly to the territories and provinces.

•(1815)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 6:15 p.m., pursuant to order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and the recorded division is deemed to have been demanded and deferred until Tuesday, June 21, 2011, at the end of government orders.

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to ask the Conservative government to be true to its word. The Conservatives claim to care about a stable government with stable policies, and as somebody who has worked a lot with small businesses, I understand that. Small businesses and individuals are worried about stable business conditions because they are worried about liquidity.

I am rising today to ask the Conservative government to help itself, to accept the suggestion from this side of the House from a couple of Liberal Party MPs to provide stability in a particular program, the eco-energy retrofit program for homes.

I will talk a bit about the eco-energy retrofit program. It encourages homeowners to do energy audits of their homes. These energy audits are done by trained professionals. The result of these energy audits give the homeowners information about how to invest a dollar in energy retrofits and how to get the most benefit from each dollar invested. For example, it will tell homeowners that they should invest in insulation in their houses first, or that they really need to fix particular windows and that will give them great value for their money. It helps homeowners save dollars in their homes at the same time as they save energy and also usually reducing their greenhouse gas emissions.

I am speaking today on behalf of businesses, small businesses which are, for example, energy auditors, renewable energy companies, businesses that will come and insulate, or seal homes or provide heating and air conditioning. These businesses have been affected by the Conservative government's policies with respect to the eco-energy retrofit program for homes.

This program was killed in 2006 when the Conservatives took power. It was restarted about a year later and then it was allowed to run out last year. It was reinstated in budget 2011, but only for one year. The problem is a small business owner cannot run that small business when the policy changes. It is cancelled and brought back, cancelled and brought back.

Adjournment Proceedings

I have had personal experience working with some of these small businesses, which were reeling from this change in policies. The government, the members opposite, recognize that this is a good program. It helps people save money and it saves energy. The best way to save money is to reduce waste. I know the government is in favour of reducing waste. This program helps reduce the wastage of energy.

Members of the Liberal Party ask the government to commit to a stable five year eco-energy retrofit program for homes. This is good for small businesses, good for homeowners and good for the environment.

Will the government be true to its words and support stability, stable policies and commit to a five year eco-energy retrofit program for homes?

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a delight to be here addressing this issue one more time. This program has been very successful and well used by Canadians. I should run through a more complete history than the member opposite did.

This program was announced in January of 2007 and \$160 million was put toward it. In March of 2009, under the economic action plan, we provided another \$300 million to help an additional estimated 200,000 homeowners with the eco-energy retrofit homes program. Then again, in December 2009, the program received an additional \$200 million and in 2010 another \$80 million. This year, we have again provided \$400 million for the 2011-12 retrofit homes program.

I want to thank the hon. member for Kingston and the Islands for inquiring about our government's eco-energy retrofit homes program. Canadians have certainly utilized this program. It is a pleasure for me to discuss just how popular this energy efficiency program continues to be.

Thousands more homeowners, because of the \$400 million we put in this year, will be provided financial help to make their homes more energy efficient and reduce their energy costs. The popularity of this program is remarkable. It has been highly significant for the environment and local economies right across Canada.

Since it was launched about five years ago, over 500,000 Canadian homeowners have applied to the program. They have received grants up to \$5,000 each. I believe the average has been about \$1,400 or \$1,500 on those grants. They cover a wide range of improvements, things like home insulation, more efficient heating, energy-saving windows and doors, those kinds of things.

On average, when they are done, homeowners are saving approximately 20% per year on their energy bills. It is clear the program is helping to clean up our environment and it is saving Canadian homeowners money at the same time. Communities across Canada are obviously benefiting from this as well. It has provided much needed business stimuli and job creation as people upgrade their homes.

It is estimated that this program has generated more than \$7.5 billion in economic activity since it began. As one of our government's clean energy initiatives, the program is part of a

comprehensive approach to improve Canada's competitiveness and to ensure that we continue to be a leader in green job creation.

I should point out that since 2006 our government has committed more than \$10 billion to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to build a more sustainable environment through investments in green infrastructure, energy efficiency, clean energy technologies, and the production of cleaner energy and fuels.

For these reasons, the eco-energy retrofit homes program continues and we are pleased that the program has been extended to the end of this fiscal year.

● (1820)

Mr. Ted Hsu: Mr. Speaker, I agree very much with what my hon. colleague has said. It is a great program. I like it. I have worked with companies that love it. However, imagine that I am a small business and I see that this program is going to be extended for just a year. I am going to have trouble hiring good people because I might be able to hire them for only a year due to not knowing whether this program is going to last more than a year. It has a history of being cancelled and brought back.

My real question is this. Why does the government not help itself by helping small business? He would really be helping his own government and the reputation of its stability by providing the benefits that come with stability and simply guaranteeing that this program lasts a number of years instead of just one. The member opposite would be helping his own party by making that commitment.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Speaker, we have certainly helped Canadians and we will continue to do that in a variety of ways. Another way we do that, as the member opposite mentioned, is reducing waste. It is incumbent upon us to ensure efficiencies in the programs and that we review them from time to time. We did that with this program and brought it back for this year.

We set some very aggressive targets, such as the greenhouse gas emissions target. We want to reduce them by 17% below 2005 levels by 2020. We are doing this through a variety of ways, through a new clean energy industry. Natural Resources Canada of course is playing a key role in those efforts and that includes delivering several of these eco-energy initiatives, among them the home retrofit program.

I should point out that we are doing much more than that under the economic action plan. We are supporting a number of other things. We have invested \$87 million in research and development, and demonstrations of clean energy, \$86 million for clean energy regulatory actions, and another \$40 million over two years for sustainable development technology. We are doing our part to change the environment in this country.

Adjournment Proceedings

● (1825)

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak once again to the closure of the maritime sub-centre in St. John's and of course the centre as well in Quebec City. At this point in time, my concern is that we cannot seem to get across to the Government of Canada how important that sub-centre is to the lives of people who spend much of their time at sea, whether we are talking about sailors, fishers, or people who just use the sea for pleasure, or oil workers, for instance.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, we have a very risky environment for anyone who goes to sea. We have been trying to tell the minister responsible for fisheries and oceans and the Prime Minister and anyone else who will listen that to continue down the path of closing that sub-centre is going to mean much more harm to people. We have said time and again that the people working in the sub-centre really need to know Newfoundland and Labrador. They really need to know the island portion of our province in particular and be familiar with all of that part of our country in order to do justice to serve the needs of people who use the sea for travelling or for whatever purpose.

I know that many fishers and many oil workers who go to sea to earn a living cannot even imagine not being able to access a safety centre that is within their own area, within St. John's. Remember that the 12 people who work in that centre have worked there for quite some time and know only too well all of the area around Newfoundland and Labrador. The minute people call in an SOS, or the minute people say they are in danger, all they have to do is say where. The 12 individuals who work in that centre know exactly where they are, exactly how to reach them and they know the best thing to do.

Just as an example, a call came in this past Saturday. Three fishermen were stranded on a rock ledge in Labrador, their small boat swallowed by rough seas. The people in the centre did not have to spend time looking at nautical charts because they knew exactly when the call came in where these people were stranded and knew exactly what to do.

Another example of what has happened at sea that I would think would make the government think twice about its decision, was the crash of the Cougar helicopter where we lost 17 lives. The Wells inquiry was undertaken at that time and one of its recommendations was to enhance safety, not diminish it.

So, here we are after all of that has taken place and now we see safety being diminished because once we move the responsibility for safety from that centre to Halifax, or to Nova Scotia, or to Trenton, Ontario, we are going to end up with people who are less knowledgeable about the area and less knowledgeable about the risky environment in which people work from day-to-day. That is a serious issue for those of us who are familiar with the centre itself and with the 12 individuals who work there.

Apart from the safety aspect, which is crucial, we are also talking about the loss of jobs. We are talking about the loss of very capable individuals who can do the best service that needs to be done in protecting those who spend their time at sea.

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to respond to the issue raised by my colleague from Random—Burin—St. George's regarding the consolidation of the St. John's sub-centre with the joint rescue coordination centre in Halifax.

Let me begin by reassuring my colleague and indeed all Canadians that when it comes to Canadian Coast Guard and search and rescue activities, safety is our number one priority. We would not put this measure in place unless we were confident it could be implemented seamlessly and safely. As the coast guard motto says "Safety First, Service Always".

The main point I wanted to make is that the decision to consolidate was a careful decision made on the recommendation of the Canadian Coast Guard and it will not compromise the on-water response time.

There are three joint rescue coordination centres across the country, in Halifax, Trenton and Victoria. They handle all search and rescue tasking for both the Canadian Forces and Coast Guard. In addition to the three joint centres, 35 years ago two sub-centres were established in Quebec City and St. John's.

At the time the sub-centres served an important purpose in their day, before the advent of new technology. In fact, as Canadian Forces Lieutenant-Colonel John Blakeley has stated:

We've just reached a point where technology allows us to do everything out of the three main joint rescue communication centres.

By transferring resources to the joint centres, it will make it easier for the Coast Guard to work more closely with its Canadian Forces partners by locating all maritime and air search and rescue coordinators in the same centres.

The Coast Guard's maritime search and rescue coordinators will continue to organize rescues by gathering all information available about the persons in distress, as well as the positions of potential assisting resources in the area of an incident.

It goes without saying that the rescue centres will continue to be operational 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and staffed by Canadian Forces and Canadian Coast Guard personnel who are thoroughly trained to evaluate various situations and send the most effective resources to deal with a particular incident.

We will continue to ensure that local knowledge and expertise are embedded in the tools and training of the crews, mariners and Coast Guard employees. Let me say again that the response on the water will not change. The officers, helicopters and vessels, including the two heavy icebreakers that were recently moved to the St. John's area, will remain in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Our government received a strong mandate from Canadians last month to govern responsibly and to respect taxpayers' dollars. As part of a routine review, the Coast Guard identified this duplication of service as an area of inefficiency. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that the money Canadians entrust to us is spent well and wisely. It is our government's responsibility to ensure that our economy recovers from the economic downturn.

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The move to consolidate our search and rescue operations out of the three existing joint centres is sound, both operationally and fiscally. Aeronautical and marine search and rescue services will continue to be performed in the excellent way Canadians have come to expect. In fact, as already stated, as we facilitate coordination by working more closely with our Canadian Forces partners within one joint centre, services may actually be improved and at the same time we are saving money for Canadians.

Let me conclude by reaffirming the commitment of Fisheries and Oceans Canada to ensuring the safety of the maritime community in Newfoundland and Labrador and in the rest of Canada.

• (1830)

Ms. Judy Foote: Mr. Speaker, I have to respond with disbelief at some of the commentary just made by my hon. colleague, to suggest that this is a way of saving dollars and of becoming much more efficient.

This is about safety. If the government wants to save dollars, it should look at cabinet, look at the size of cabinet and the fact that it has increased. An increase in the size of cabinet means an increase in the expenditures.

If the government wants to save money, it should not, for heaven's sake, look at safety issues. It is the same issue as when the government wanted to de-staff the lighthouses. The government said it was going to automate lighthouses and was going to get rid of the people who were there.

It was the wrong decision and the government, in its wisdom, after some outcry and some representation on behalf of those who travel on the sea who made the point that it cannot be done because it

is not the same as having a set of eyes, having a human there versus having an automated lighthouse.

I am going to ask the government once again to reconsider this decision, just the way it did with the manned lighthouses.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Mr. Speaker, contrary to some of the statements that have been made, the safety of Canadians will not be compromised by the consolidation of the two sub-centres into the existing joint rescue coordination centre.

This consolidation will make it easier for the Coast Guard to work more closely with its Canadian Forces partners. The consolidation will also have no impact on the level of search and rescue response services delivered to Canadians. I think that we would agree that is the bottom line.

We are a government that listens. When forming government in 2006, the Coast Guard made us very much aware of its significant needs for capital investment. We responded with over \$1.4 billion in investment. We are supporting the Coast Guard.

Very careful thought was given to this decision. There will be the same level of capacity on the water. Local knowledge will be used in search and rescue coordination. Service will continue to be available in both official languages.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:34 p.m.)

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