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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Wednesday, February 1, 2012

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

CONTENTS

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

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, February 1, 2012

The House met at 2 p.m.

Prayers

• (1405)

[English]

The Speaker: It being Wednesday, we will now have the singing of the national anthem led by the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore.

[Members sang the national anthem]

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[English]

OUTMA SQILX'W CULTURAL SCHOOL

Mr. Dan Albas (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC): Mr. Speaker, much has been said recently of the challenges in some first nations communities, but we must not overlook some of the great success stories of first nations achievement.

This past June, the member for Kenora joined me in my riding of Okanagan—Coquihalla for an important event with Penticton Indian Band Chief Jonathan Kruger. We were joined by elders and youth alike to celebrate the opening of the Outma Sqilx'w Cultural School.

This school represents a \$7 million investment in aboriginal education from our government. However, more important is what the school represents to the heritage and the culture of the Penticton Indian Band.

Gone are the decades-old portables left over from previous governments. Replacing them is a state of the art educational and cultural facility that flows from a traditional pit house. The facility instills pride and excitement in the youth of the Penticton Indian Band. Student attendance is now at an all-time high. More importantly, the school is now a place to gather and play sports. It keeps the community engaged and active. That is a success we can all celebrate.

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THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 1996, the federal government, the western provinces, Yukon and the

Northwest Territories signed the Mackenzie River Basin Master Agreement. Out of this master agreement a number of bilateral agreements were to be completed, governing the quantity and quality of water moving along the Mackenzie River Basin. Fifteen years later, there are still no agreements.

In Alberta and the Northwest Territories, the lack of a bilateral agreement has meant that the rapid expansion of the oil sands is taking place without proper controls protecting these waters. This lack of control is of great concern to all northerners, particularly aboriginal people, many of whom live along the Mackenzie River.

Alberta and the federal government want to approve more capacity building by quickly approving the gateway pipeline. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Natural Resources want to simplify the environmental process to allow new developments clear sailing through these waters. However, they should assure the people of the north that basic agreements will be in place before the expansion of the oil sands.

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VÁCLAV HAVEL

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on December 18, 2011, former president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, passed away.

Havel once said, “I really do inhabit a system in which words are capable of shaking the entire structure of government...”.

Indeed, it was the words of Havel himself that shook the foundations of the corrupt Communist system.

A gifted playwright and philosopher, Havel exposed the lies of Communism. After the Prague Spring of 1968, Havel's work was suppressed. He faced harassment, intimidation and imprisonment.

After the Velvet Revolution, he became Czechoslovakia's first post-Communist president. He oversaw the peaceful division of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Havel proved through his life, words and deeds that moral leadership can be a beacon of light in a world where many reside in darkness. A modest man whose primary focus was the well-being of his people and country, Havel's life should be a model for us all.

Potsta Vatslavo Havlovi.

Statements by Members

●(1410)

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, unlike almost any other nation on the planet, Canada is a compassionate and caring country. Canada stands as a testament to the many cultures, languages and faith groups that have, throughout our history, worked together to build and sustain our society.

With this in mind, in 1995, Prime Minister Chrétien designated February as Black History Month. It is a celebration of the numerous cultural and societal contributions made by people of African descent to the Canadian mosaic.

Today marks the launch of the 17th annual Black History Month commemoration. The 2012 theme for this important celebration is “Our Canadian Story: Making Community Engagement A Priority”.

In the upcoming days, I would encourage my colleagues and all Canadians to take a moment to celebrate the many substantial offerings made in our communities by our friends and neighbours of African lineage.

Certainly we are all better off for their work, generosity and spirit of giving.

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ISRAEL

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Foreign Affairs attended the World Economic Forum's annual gathering in Davos, Switzerland. Today, they are visiting Israel. The ministers are attending a reception co-hosted by the Canadian embassy and the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, Israel Bureau.

This reception is a celebration of the long-standing friendship between Canada and Israel and the deepening alliance between our two countries. This visit is a reflection of the level of qualitative collaboration and consultation between Canada and Israel. The Prime Minister of Israel has said that there is no better friend to Israel than Canada.

Our government is proud of its unwavering support for Israel, especially at the United Nations. Canada has spoken up against the numerous United Nations resolutions critical solely of Israel. Our government is proud and unapologetic for its support for the only thriving democracy in the Middle East.

I wish the ministers all the best in their meetings in Israel and in their efforts to strengthen the relationship between Canada and Israel. *Mazel tov.*

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SEALING INDUSTRY

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the market for Canadian seal products has never been as desperate as it is today, under the Conservative government. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador is even considering asking sealers to stockpile seal products this year for lack of market.

Under the Conservative government, the European Union and Russia have imposed bans on Canadian seal products. Russia was

the primary market for Canadian seal products, purchasing up to 95%.

The government is supposed to be so focused on trade and the economy, and is supposed to be such a champion of the Canadian seal harvest. Yet the news of the Russian ban only came to light through the International Fund for Animal Welfare, an animal rights group.

What does that say to Canadian sealers about the Conservative government's supposed unwavering commitment to the Canadian seal harvest?

First the EU ban, now Russia. It says that commitment is a joke.

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THE ECONOMY

Ms. Wai Young (Vancouver South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege for me to wish the people of Vancouver South and the Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean communities across Canada a happy, healthy and prosperous lunar new year, the year of the dragon.

As we ushered in this new year, I heard from my constituents about their continued concern for the fragile global economy and its impact on Canada.

While Canada continues to be in a strong fiscal position, it is clear that my constituents and other Canadians want us to continue our focus on jobs and economic growth.

Last month, I represented the people of Vancouver South in the House at the Asia-Pacific parliamentary forum in Tokyo, Japan. Together, representatives from 23 Asia-Pacific countries met to discuss issues of great importance to Canada and our global partners.

It is clear that Vancouver continues to be a dynamic gateway to diversify our government's efforts to ensure a strong economic recovery for Canada and the world.

As we enter this challenging but exciting year of the dragon, I look forward to working on behalf of the people of Vancouver South to continue to be—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Mississauga—Brampton South.

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THE ECONOMY

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the economic recovery is, and must remain, our government's top priority this year.

Not only is our government proud to have economically outperformed most other industrialized nations, we are even more determined to ensure that Canadians are protected this year and in the years to come.

With achievements such as *Forbes* magazine ranking Canada as the best place to grow a business, our government is pursuing unprecedented trade agreements with other nations. These trade agreements will strengthen our economy and create jobs and prosperity.

*Statements by Members***BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

I have been busy with community events over the last month. I engaged in prebudget consultations with workers, job creators, the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, ratepayers' associations, moms, dads, seniors, students and new Canadians. I look forward to continuing these meetings and working to ensure that the economy remains our number one priority in 2012.

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• (1415)

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, every February since 1976 we have proudly celebrated Black History Month. This is an important time to reflect on the struggles of people who have enriched the multicultural character of our country. These struggles were difficult and the fight for women's rights continues. We should take the time to congratulate this country's black women on their successes.

I think about Rosemary Brown, the first black woman to be elected to a parliamentary institution.

I think about Juanita Westmoreland-Traoré, the first black judge in Quebec.

We also can never forget the countless black female artists who make up our communities.

[*Translation*]

As a woman, I am honoured to be surrounded by such inspiring black women in Canada. The fight for women's equality, for equality for the black community, for equality for everyone, really, is not over. Together we must continue to build a better Canada, where diversity is celebrated with pride and respect. As we celebrate Black History Month, let us remember the achievements of black women and continue making progress.

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[*English*]**BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

Ms. Roxanne James (Scarborough Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, every February Canadians celebrate Black History Month by learning about and reflecting upon the legacy and accomplishments of black Canadians.

In conjunction with the 200th anniversary of the War of 1812, we are taking a special look this year at the important contributions made by black soldiers to the historic battles that helped define our country.

Many former slaves and black Loyalists fought on the Canadian side during the War of 1812. They settled in places such as Nova Scotia and in my province of Ontario. They and their descendants formed communities that continue to enrich Canada to this very day.

This February, I encourage all Canadians to learn more about how black Canadians have helped contribute to and shape our great country, and to participate in activities in their communities that celebrate this important part of our Canadian heritage.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on this day, the first day of Black History Month, 2012, I call on Canadians to join in celebration of the contributions that Canadians of African descent have made in the building of Canada. The contribution of African Canadians did not start with the waves of Caribbean immigrants during the 1960s, nor did it start with those who found refuge here by the grace of the underground railroad. It started with Matthew de Costa, an interpreter and negotiator for Champlain. It is the black Loyalists who fought for King George through the American Revolution and settled as Loyalists in Nova Scotia. It is the settlers of Amber Valley, Saskatchewan; Windsor, Ontario; Salt Spring Island, B.C. It is their brave participation in every battle for Canadian and world freedom.

They are inventors, businessmen, leaders, creators, thinkers, healers, warriors, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and ancestors. The children of Kush have given to Canada even before Canada existed.

However, there is work to be done. Balance and equality are still out of reach. I urge every Canadian to take a moment to discover who their neighbour is, to learn about their journey and to share their own.

Black History Month is not simply about looking back at the past, but using the past to move forward into the future.

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ROYAL CANADIAN MOUNTED POLICE

Mr. Robert Goguen (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the RCMP is one of Canada's most recognizable symbols. A Mountie dressed in the red serge is central to our Canadian identity. From coast to coast, the RCMP work hard every day keeping our streets and communities safe. That is how we view the RCMP on this side of the House.

Unfortunately, the NDP sees things a little differently. The NDP is now attempting to use Canada's national police force as a political football. It has accused the RCMP commissioner of being muzzled. As Commissioner Paulson said, he has never been muzzled and he doesn't know where that accusation came from.

Shockingly, the member for St. John's East has even called it disturbing that the commissioner is not standing up with his party to persecute law-abiding hunters, farmers and sport shooters with the long gun registry.

The role of the RCMP is to enforce the law, not to decide what the law should be. Commissioner Paulson has stated that himself. Trying to politicize a national police force is not only really disturbing, but also just another example that the NDP is unfit to govern.

Oral Questions

●(1420)

B.C. LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY BLACK ROD

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I joined High Commissioner Campbell, the former premier of British Columbia, and other dignitaries in an historic celebration of Canadian tradition and heritage. In honour of Her Majesty's diamond jubilee, the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia is creating an usher of the black rod. Tracing back to 14th century England, the black rod deepens B.C.'s connection with our proud roots in the Westminster parliamentary tradition.

Today was part two of three-part ceremony to install symbolic rings on this rod. The first was attached in the House of Lords of the United Kingdom in December, and the final will be attached at the official opening of the B.C. legislative assembly in February.

The mid section of the black rod features a special jade carving by Tsimshian elder, Clifford Bolton, representing the unity and intertwining of B.C.'s diverse cultures and hope for the future.

As a member of parliament from British Columbia, I am honoured to mark the placement of the second ring of the black rod in Ottawa on its journey to Victoria. I congratulate all British Columbians for this symbol and celebration of our important heritage.

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NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Kerry-Lynne D. Findlay (Delta—Richmond East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yesterday in question period the member of Parliament for Burnaby—New Westminster and the NDP interim finance critic outrageously overstated the cost of F-35s. His statement was false and completely dishonest.

It is unfortunate that the member and his party deliberately refuse to do basic research and instead choose to make things up as they go along. If the member did his research he would realize that the benefits of this purchase have already resulted in over \$300 million in contracts for Canadian companies, one of which employs hundreds of workers in my riding of Delta—Richmond East. These contracts are providing important work to an industry comprising over 10,000 highly skilled manufacturing jobs.

The NDP's willingness to distort the facts and mislead Canadians is further proof that it is not fit to govern.

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[Translation]

THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Natural Resources recently said that Canadians who financially support environmental protection organizations are a "threat" to Canada.

Last week in Davos, speaking to the richest men on the planet, the Prime Minister said that our demographics constitute a threat to Canada. He was talking about Canadians who, like me, will reach the age of 65 by 2025 and receive an old age pension. The Conservatives regard baby boomers as a threat to Canada.

The real threat to Canada is neither the environmentalists nor our aging population. The real threat to Canada's future is the blind economic policy of this government, which will cut thousands of jobs across Canada in order to finance tax cuts for large corporations, which will then turn around and shut down.

I have a message for the members of this government: Canadians are not a threat; they are a source of wisdom. The proof—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Elmwood—Transcona.

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[English]

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the firing of rockets by Hamas into Israeli communities has been and continues to be a regular occurrence. These attacks strike police stations, coffee shops and even elementary schools are done without remorse. Hamas' goal is simple: the total destruction of Israel and the slaughter of all Jews.

In Canada, Hamas is rightly listed as a terrorist organization. Unfortunately, Canada's official opposition does not see this anti-Semitic organization as all that bad. Last night on *Power and Politics*, when given multiple opportunities to say that the NDP would not work with this terrorist organization, the NDP member for Newton—North Delta refused to do so. Sadly, this NDP policy should come as no surprise from a party that includes a member who has said that Israel has been an occupied territory since 1948. This irresponsible position is further proof that the NDP is not fit to govern.

ORAL QUESTIONS

●(1425)

[Translation]

LA JUSTICE

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is against the law to counsel or encourage someone to commit suicide. That is precisely what Conservative Senator Boisvenu has done by saying that there should be ropes available in every jail cell.

Does the Prime Minister support his senator's comments? If not, what does he plan on doing about this?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the senator has already withdrawn his comments. This government is here to protect victims. Mr. Boisvenu's family suffered a terrible crime in the past. This government wants to prevent such crimes from happening in the future.

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that is not good enough. What Senator Boisvenu did is against the law: we cannot call on people to kill themselves. This is clear. The death penalty debate has been closed in Canada for decades. Why are the Conservatives reopening old debates?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I just said, the senator has clearly withdrawn those words. I think we all understand that Senator Boisvenu and his family have suffered horribly in the past and obviously we understand his emotions in that regard, but this government is focused on making sure we protect victims in the future.

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*[Translation]***PENSIONS**

Mrs. Nycole Turmel (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what Senator Boisvenu said does not make any sense. This is just another reason to abolish the Senate.

On another topic, the Prime Minister has been beating around the bush for two days. Is he going to cut old age security benefits or not? Will people have to wait until they are 67 or not? We want an answer.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was very clear. This government is not going to cut seniors' benefits. At the same time, we are going to protect the system for future generations. The opposition is frightening seniors, but we are protecting them.

[English]

If I could also just reply once again to the previous comment on the senator. I would encourage the NDP to really focus on trying to help us deal with the criminal justice system, and try to prevent the kinds of terrible victims we have seen in the past and to do things so there are not more people like the Boisvenu family in the future.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are not mistaken. They know that if they are 40, 50 or 60, this government wants to attack their pensions. At the same time, the Conservatives are providing the oil and gas industries with \$2 billion in subsidies a year. That is equivalent to old age security cheques for 308,000 Canadians for a year.

The Conservatives have a choice. Why are they not making cuts to their prisons, their fighter jets, and their boondoggle projects, and why are they not giving seniors the priority they deserve? That is what we are saying.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is wrong. In fact, the people who are currently receiving old age security benefits will continue to receive them. They will not lose a penny. What we are going to do is protect the old age security system for these people and for future generations.

[English]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadian are paying their taxes, living by the rules,

banking on old age security when they retire and Conservatives are plotting to change the rules. In 2032, the percentage of GDP devoted to OAS will actually be declining, and yet Conservatives are trying to manufacture a crisis so they can cut benefits to seniors in the future. Budgets are about choices. Why are Conservatives choosing to spend \$30 billion on F-35s, \$19 billion on prisons, but claim they cannot find \$540 a month for Canadian seniors?

• (1430)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have an obligation to protect all Canadians, whether that be through our military so we can protect against foreign invasions or, indeed, to protect their financial security.

We need to protect all Canadians and that includes protecting their financial security in their old age. That is exactly what we are working to do. We have been saying that every Canadian who is now receiving old age security will not lose a penny.

[Translation]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, first, it is low-income seniors who qualify for old age security benefits. Second, people have to have access to old age security in order to have access to the guaranteed income supplement. Third, seniors need to have access to the guaranteed income supplement in order to have access to provincial and municipal benefits.

Does the Prime Minister truly understand the problem that he is creating for low-income Canadians by changing old age security?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this government has made it clear that we will protect our seniors. We also intend to protect future generations. As I just said, the opposition wants to frighten seniors but our government will ensure that seniors are protected now and in the future.

[English]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government's position seems to be, "We want to protect old age security and that is why we are cutting it". That is the logic of what the Conservatives are saying. It is preposterous.

The Prime Minister, I am sure, understands that when qualifying for old age security at 65, that then qualifies people for the guaranteed income supplement. That then qualifies people for a provincial drug card, which then provides them access to municipal benefits and other provincial benefits. It also affects every private sector pension arrangement or retirement arrangement.

Does the Prime Minister not understand that in speculating about raising the age past 65 to 66 and 67, he is causing great difficulty for the most vulnerable citizens?

Oral Questions

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, I do not accept the premise of the hon. member's question. This government has made it very clear that we will protect all of the benefits that go to seniors today. A senior will not lose a single penny, no one near retirement. What we are dealing with is people far off in the future who are very worried about their income security because they understand the pressures we are under. We are going to ensure the system protects them as well.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister is basically saying, "We are going to protect the system by cutting access to it". That is what he is saying. He cannot deny it.

He is not only dumping on the most vulnerable senior citizens, including women who are going to be qualifying for old age security who get their old age pensions, he is also dumping on the provinces, dumping on municipalities, creating a cascade of injustice because of a totally manufactured crisis on his side. It is a well known neo-conservative tactic that the Prime Minister is engaging in. I can tell him we are not going to put up with it and neither are the Canadian people. They will not accept it.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, even the *Globe and Mail* has said that the leader of the Liberal Party is fearmongering, and that is before all the nonsense we just heard.

The fact is it is very rich for a Liberal leader to talk about offloading costs to the provinces. That was the party that did record cuts. In order to balance the budget, it slashed education and health care funding to the provinces. This government has made sure that we are keeping our financial health, while preserving important transfers to our provinces—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Timmins—James Bay.

* * *

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians expect a just resolution to the Attawapiskat crisis, but the minister prefers to punish the community. It has been two months since he has cut off all the funding to the education system and to students. He has cut off the funding that is needed to actually prepare the site so the modular homes can be brought in. We have a technical team on the ground from De Beers that is waiting to bring this story to a conclusion, but the third party manager in Winnipeg is sitting on all the money.

Why is he treating this desperately poor community like a hostage?

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all of the statements that were just made are all basically fabrications. They do not reflect the truth. We are committed to ensuring the health and safety of the people of Attawapiskat.

In terms of the third party manager, that is a matter before the courts and it would be inappropriate to comment further.

•(1435)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is inappropriate that a man has decided to punish the most

desperately poor community by cutting off funding to children who are in ramshackle portables. Meanwhile he has hired a third-party manager to sponge off their backs to the tune of \$50,000, while the technical team from De Beers does not have a dime to prepare the homes. These are Canadian citizens. They should not be treated like a hostage population. He has to stand and explain his attack on this community.

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is a very simple question. We have a manager in place and he wants to work with the first nations leadership in the community. He has asked for and not received the information he needs in order to pay the bills for which the member for Timmins is asking.

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[Translation]

GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, either this government is incompetent, or it is on a mission to destroy people's quality of life. I think it might be both.

Unemployment is on the rise, the economy is foundering, the deficit is growing, banks and oil companies are paying less tax, and the government wants to slash haphazardly at services that help the most vulnerable members of our society without even considering the repercussions. The Conservatives need a reality check. Will this government commit to maintaining the services that are essential to our fellow citizens' well-being?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we always try to make sure that people get their benefits as quickly as possible. That can be hard sometimes, so that is why we are upgrading the system.

[English]

We want to verify the accuracy to ensure people can get the cheques they need, the ones they are entitled to, just as quickly as possible.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, they still have a lot of work to do.

I am glad that the minister brought up the subject of benefits because I have a little story to tell. A Montreal woman waited four months for her employment insurance application to be processed. That is much longer than the 28 days the Conservatives promise on their website. Frankly, that is disgraceful.

How many other families struggling with unemployment are suffering right now because they cannot count on receiving a cheque? In real life, nobody has four months' salary hidden in a sock or under a mattress at home.

What does the minister have to say to people who are wondering if they will ever get the benefits to which they are entitled?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are working as fast as we can to help people who have lost their jobs. In particularly difficult situations, members are welcome to contact me with the details so that we can find a solution as quickly as possible.

Oral Questions

[English]

AIRLINE SECURITY

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, without any consultation, the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities quietly changed identification requirements for security screening at airports. Airlines are now required to block transgendered Canadians from flying if their appearance does not match the gender shown on their ID. This is both discriminatory and a violation of Canadian mobility rights.

Will the minister now acknowledge and respect transgendered Canadians' rights and will the members opposite stop making light of this question and immediately rescind this regulation?

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, there are very important security rules for boarding airplanes in Canada in order to protect the public. These rules are applied fairly for all passengers.

[Translation]

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very disappointed with the response of the Minister of Transport. Once again, the Conservatives are showing the extent of their ignorance of the reality of transsexual and transgendered people and LGBT issues in Canada. Transport Canada has shown a complete lack of sensitivity. This new air transportation regulation will prevent transgendered and transsexual people from boarding flights.

Will the minister acknowledge this mistake and immediately amend the requirements in order to respect the rights of transsexual and transgendered Canadians? This is unacceptable.

• (1440)

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, what is unacceptable is that the member's party regularly asks us to increase security at Canadian airports and for air transportation. The critic asks for this on a regular basis. Today, he is asking us to relax the rules, to make our airport security measures less stringent. All passengers will continue to be carefully monitored by airport screeners. Airport security is extremely important to our government.

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MATERNAL HEALTH

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Muskoka initiative will not include funding for a family planning organization. In other words, the Prime Minister's maternal health plan completely ignores a key component of the maternal health objectives.

Can the Prime Minister explain his twisted logic regarding maternal health in developing countries? Are we to understand that, not surprisingly, he is giving in to pressure from the right-wing religious fanatics on the backbenches who want to reopen the abortion debate?

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has been very clear. We want to help improve the health of mothers and children. Our efforts to do so have delivered results, and we have done it effectively.

For example, in Ethiopia, we now have 4,000 new community health workers helping 3 million women and their children. In Mozambique, Canada is providing HIV treatment for 39,000 children and 102 pregnant women. In Tanzania, 24 million children and pregnant women will receive immunization. I could go on and on.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what is obvious is that cracks are showing on that side of the House.

The Prime Minister claims he is not reopening these debates, yet he has a trio of backbench Conservatives eagerly pushing a challenge to a woman's right to choose. He is playing hide and seek with funding for international maternal health organizations.

Does the Prime Minister still claim his government is not reopening the debate on abortion, or is he finally giving way to his fringe backbenchers?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has been very clear. We are not opening up the discussion on abortion, but we are improving the health and reducing the mortality of women and children in developing countries.

We have been doing this and we are showing results. There will now be 10,000 citizens in Ghana receiving maternal health services. In India, 1,100 health workers have been trained in 600 villages. That means 280,000 women will receive maternal assistance. In Bangladesh, we—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Trois-Rivières.

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[Translation]

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday morning, the Auditor General admitted that it will take him more than a year to learn French. What a surprise. Every one of the recently laid-off second language teachers could have predicted that. And this morning, francophones got another slap in the face. We learned that two francophone Conservative MPs who were members of the Standing Committee on Official Languages have been transferred to another committee. Bilingualism in Canada is not a luxury we can do without.

When will we see concrete and consistent actions from this government in order to protect francophones' rights?

Oral Questions

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we can point with pride to a number of our efforts and political commitments. Just look at our Roadmap for Canada's Linguistic Duality. It is an unprecedented commitment to protect Canada's two official languages and to celebrate and promote francophone life in every region of our country. Francophone communities in every corner of our country have been supported by our unprecedented investments and we will continue to make such investments.

* * *

[English]

PENSIONS

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let the record be clear. Cutting existing pension benefits from Canadian seniors is not new for the government.

On May 17, 2010, Conservatives changed the rules and cut current OAS recipients of guaranteed income supplement benefits if they made an emergency withdrawal from their own registered savings. This party, the Liberal Party, forced them to back down, but now they are back to their old dirty tricks.

Will the Prime Minister personally commit that absolutely no policy or legislative changes are in the works to reduce OAS or GIS benefits? Could I have a clear answer, please?

• (1445)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have some challenges. We have some changing demographics that mean we have to plan not just for today, but also for the financial security of our future seniors. That is exactly what we are going to do.

Unfortunately, every time we try to do something to help seniors, like introduce pension income splitting or increase the GIS by record amounts, the Liberals vote against it.

* * *

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, it seems the Conservative hypocrisy knows no end.

While the government is willing to provide general salary information about employees at the CBC, it has refused to release any information about salaries at the Prime Minister's office.

Now, it is pathetic that the President of the Treasury Board, who claims to be "an open government advocate", is now blocking the release of even the most basic information about the PMO salaries. However, given his record in Muskoka, this comes as no big surprise.

When will the minister stop obstructing and release this information?

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would remind the hon. member and his caucus colleagues over there that we have laws in

his country, including the Access to Information Act and the Privacy Act, where the names and exact salaries of personnel cannot be released. I would assure the hon. member, however, that spending in this Prime Minister's office has gone down by 9% since last year.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government has, time and time again, shown it does not care for evidence-based decision making. It also has become quite evident that the government does not understand science.

This week a response to a petition was delivered to us, signed by the minister, that listed the subject as "climate change". The actual subject of the petition was "ozone monitoring".

Does the minister understand the difference between climate change and ozone monitoring?

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, yes, this government does indeed know the difference and much better than the previous Liberal government.

In response to questions through the fall session, I repeatedly assured my colleague that Environment Canada would continue to monitor ozone and that the World Ozone and Ultraviolet Radiation Data Centre would continue to deliver world-class service.

At the same time, we are committed, realistically, to the matter of climate change.

* * *

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, students across Canada are taking to the streets calling for action to reduce tuition fees and the ever-rising student debt.

Education is the key to moving our economy forward. The government has done nothing to make university and college more affordable. Every dollar it claims to have been spent has been clawed back by tuition fee hikes.

Instead of pushing its costly prisons agenda, why will the government not work with cash-strapped provinces to make education more affordable?

Oral Questions

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over the last six years our government has done more to help students than any government before it. We introduced the Canada student grants program, which is helping almost 300,000 students access post-secondary education. We made scholarships and bursaries tax free. We have invested billions of dollars in infrastructure in colleges and universities so that students have a place to go to learn where they have up-to-date, modern equipment.

We have done all this to help students and we have done it in spite of the opposition of the NDP.

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, all this and yet student debt is about to pass \$15 billion, the legal limit. Instead of helping students, the Conservatives want to change the law.

[*Translation*]

Students are getting their degrees, but the youth unemployment rate is 14%. Worse yet, this government simply wants to cut their old age security.

Instead of leading the next generation into bankruptcy, why does this government not listen? When will it commit to improving post-secondary education for all Canadians?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is precisely what we have been doing for the six years that we have been governing. We have introduced non-repayable grants for students. We have made the grants non-repayable.

That being said, the hon. member should know that it is the provinces and territories that set tuition fees.

* * *

• (1450)

[*English*]

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadian development priorities are getting all mixed up under the government. The Conservatives froze our aid budget and then cut funding to long-standing Canadian aid partners.

Governing is all about choices. Instead of helping poorer nations and fostering development, the Conservatives are asking taxpayers to subsidize budgets for some of the world's wealthiest corporations.

Why has the minister decided to cut aid to developing countries and subsidize wealthy corporations?

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, this government is about using its development funds to ensure we are getting results and we are making a difference in the lives of those we want to help. We want to ensure that the unemployed youth, who are growing every year in developing countries, will have the skills and training they need to be gainfully employed. They want to increase their income and help increase the incomes of their families. This is the best way to reduce poverty. That is why we are using our aid dollars effectively.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am sure we can agree that aid should not be used to benefit profitable corporations or finance activities that would happen anyway. We should not be doing the work of corporations in training their own personnel.

We need to remember that CIDA's mandate is to reduce poverty, not to further private sector interests or short term trade priorities.

Will the minister commit to ensuring that CIDA's work focuses on creating the best conditions for development, not just a PR boost for mining companies.

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government wants to ensure that we are utilizing the expertise, the experience and the knowledge, leveraging our ability to help people living in poverty. That means we will look to the private sector and continue our good partnership with civil society and NGO organizations.

We can maximize the value of our aid dollars by using the best that Canada has to offer to help those living in developing countries.

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Hon. Rob Merrifield (Yellowhead, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our hard-working Minister of International Trade just finished a successful trade mission to Libya.

When Canadian companies build business partnerships with Libya, stability and prosperity follows and it only contributes to Libya's rebuilding.

We also know that the Prime Minister's commitment to helping Libya transition into a peaceful democracy based on rule of law and respect of human rights will also be accomplished.

Could the minister tell this House why this trade mission is so absolutely important to Libya and Canada at this important junction in history?

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are helping the Libyans build a fair and democratic society that respects human rights and the rule of law.

I just returned from Libya where I led a trade mission to support Canadian companies that were ready to put their expertise to work in Libya. By working with local partners, Canadian firms will help Libyans reinvigorate and rebuild their economy,

This is good news for Canadian and Libyan workers and their families.

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NATIONAL DEFENCE

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, the minister for F-35s told the House that he was listening to experts.

Oral Questions

In November, an expert Pentagon panel found 13 major design flaws with only 20% of the testing complete. In response, the F-35 program manager acknowledged that the production plan was “a miscalculation”.

In light of the expert assessments, will the minister now acknowledge that his plan to replace the CF-18 is based on a miscalculation and put this contract out to tender?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member is wrong. F-35s are coming off the production line, pilots are flying them and over 60 Canadian industries are benefiting from the manufacturing of parts for this particular program, industries in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Quebec and Nova Scotia.

Why is the NDP against jobs for Canadians?

• (1455)

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, our allies did not need the program manager to advise them that this project is based on a fundamental miscalculation. It has been obvious to most for a long time. That is why our allies, including the U.S., have been delaying their purchases, re-assessing their orders and putting in place backup plans.

If the minister is going to ignore the experts, then perhaps he will share the research findings of his colleague from Delta—Richmond East and tell us, with the production schedule indeterminately delayed, how much it will now cost to deliver F-35s by 2020.

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in replacing the aging CF-18s, Canada made the conscious choice to partner with our closest allies to develop the next generation of aircraft for our military men and women. By doing so, we are creating jobs for Canadian workers today that will be sustained into the future. It will also ensure that our brave men and women have the equipment they need for many years to come to do their jobs in the Canadian military.

* * *

[Translation]

GOVERNMENT CONTRACTS

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Department of National Defence has awarded over half a million dollars in contracts to the mercenary group Xe Services, formally known as Blackwater, whose reputation was so tainted that its management had to change its name. That is not all. Xe Services also received \$1.8 million in contracts from the public works department. Blackwater often made the headlines for its many violations of international law and human rights.

Can the minister confirm and justify the awarding of those contracts?

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces take all necessary steps to ensure that the men and women of the Canadian forces have access to the best training forces available and the best training facilities, and that includes, typically, providing

our own trainers. However, sometimes it does involve contracting outside trainers when it is the most cost-effective option.

The type of training provided by Xe is highly specialized. It is operationally essential. In fact, it allows Canadian personnel deploying on international missions, including military police, special forces and army operational support, to have that best training possible.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we are talking about \$2.4 million in taxpayers' money that was given to a private enterprise with a dubious reputation. The government should be ashamed of itself for using the services of a mercenary group that seems to think it is above the law. Our armed forces are among the best in the world and we are recognized around the globe for how well our soldiers are trained.

Why is the government employing a group with a reputation as cowboys to train our troops, when we should be training our soldiers to promote Canadian values like obeying international law?

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that kind of histrionics is absolutely inaccurate.

As I mentioned a moment ago, we give our Canadian Forces the best possible training to prepare them for mission success, to prepare them for very complex, dangerous overseas missions in some cases. When it is our special forces and our military police, we want to ensure they are best prepared to take on those challenges.

I will never apologize for providing the necessary resources to give them that best opportunity to succeed and come home safe to their families with the pride and the support of this government and the Canadian people behind them every time.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, 200 Tamil refugees who are stranded in Togo are facing deportation to Sri Lanka where they fear they will be killed if they are made to return. They had high hopes of starting a new life of freedom. They were victimized by the human smugglers who left them stranded in Togo.

What is the government doing to ensure that people will not be victimized by the government of Sri Lanka? Will Canada work with other countries and the Canadian relatives of these victims to allow them to resettle?

Oral Questions

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians know that this government takes human smuggling very seriously. Every year, thousands of people die in human smuggling operations around the world, which is why it is important that this Parliament act to deter smugglers from targeting Canada and from exploiting people. That is why we brought forward Bill C-4. It is disappointing that the Liberal Party has opposed every effort to combat human smuggling.

In terms of co-operation with the UNHCR, I do know that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration are assisting Tamil migrants around the world to relocate back to Sri Lanka in the post-conflict environment.

* * *

● (1500)

[Translation]

AIRLINE SECURITY

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since the election, this government's lack of tolerance for our minorities has grown. A new rule prohibits airlines from allowing a person to board a plane if their appearance does not match the gender on their identification, unless they have a medical certificate. This is a direct affront to the transsexual and transgendered community, which is outraged by this minister who has introduced discrimination under the guise of security.

Why is this government obsessed with the gender of an individual, when it is their identity that matters?

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, as I stated earlier, the security of Canada's airports is extremely important to our government. We believe that it is standard procedure for every individual who wishes to board a plane to be identified by the people at security screening. Since September 11, many screening measures have been improved, and I believe that it is normal for people checking the identification of those boarding the plane to be able to recognize them. We do not believe in half measures when it comes to air security. That is very important.

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[English]

LABOUR

Mr. David Christopherson (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, shares of U.S. Steel are on their way up but workers' jobs in Hamilton are on their way out. Now the company has just slammed its doors on operations yet again.

The government has betrayed Hamilton steelworkers at least three times: first, when it allowed the U.S. Steel takeover; second, when it stood by and did nothing when steelworkers were then locked out of their jobs; and, third, when it recently dropped the federal lawsuit against U.S. Steel with still no job guarantees.

What possible justification could the government have for continuing to turn its back on these Hamilton workers and their jobs?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, when commitments are taken under the Investment Canada Act, we ensure that they are respected.

Under the agreement last December, U.S. Steel must continue to produce steel in Canada, operate at Lake Erie and Hamilton until 2015, increase its capital expenditure into Canadian facilities up to \$250 million by December 2015, and make \$3 million in contributions toward community programs in Hamilton and at Inco.

This means jobs and this means continued economic activity. This is good news.

* * *

[Translation]

FORESTRY INDUSTRY

Mr. Mathieu Ravnat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government continues to demonstrate that it does not care about the interests of Quebec industries. The Conservatives are rewarding the large oil companies with billions of dollars but have abandoned Quebec forestry workers. The situation is urgent. In my riding of Pontiac, 300 families are affected by the closure of Resolute Forest Products in Maniwaki.

What is this government waiting for to invest in an emergency fund for the Quebec forestry industry in order to revitalize it and help it survive?

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 remind the members of the House that the Minister of International Trade recently extended the softwood lumber agreement with the United States. I would like to commend him for that. This agreement allows us to keep our borders open in order to export our country's lumber. Unfortunately, the forestry industry is the victim of a tough market. Under the softwood lumber agreement, we can provide direct support to companies—the hon. member should know that—and we will continue to do everything we can to support the forestry industry.

* * *

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians gave our government a strong mandate to keep a safe, effective border and to protect the integrity of our immigration system.

That is why we developed the “Wanted by the CBSA” program. With the assistance of the public, we have been able to apprehend numerous individuals who are in Canada illegally. We have sent a clear message that if someone commits criminal acts here or is accused of being a war criminal, that individual is not welcome in Canada.

Oral Questions

Could the Minister of Public Safety please give the House an update on this program?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his support of this important program.

We are pleased with the success of the wanted by the CBSA program. Canadians from coast to coast to coast have co-operated with their local law enforcement officials to remove those who have no business being in Canada.

I am pleased to announce that Ian Getfield, an individual who is inadmissible for serious criminal convictions, was apprehended last night in Toronto. Additionally, CBSA has removed Delson Jules today, who has also been convicted of serious offences.

Canada will not be a safe haven for foreign criminals.

* * *

• (1505)

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker the *Amundsen* has been removed from service. This vessel provides critical scientific research on many issues, not the least of which is environmental changes in the Arctic.

With the Conservative government slashing tens of millions of dollars from DFO and the Coast Guard, can we trust that this very important vessel will be operating in the near future? Could the minister assure the House that this important vessel will be back in the water soon?

Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is a bit rich coming from the member opposite. The former Liberal government had ships sitting at the docks rusting and with no fuel. We have made major investments in our coast guard and will continue to do.

The *Amundsen* will be out of service for the rest of the winter season because of significant engine problems. The Canadian Coast Guard will redeploy its operational fleet in eastern Canada in order to minimize impacts in icebreaking, flood control and search and rescue services.

* * *

[Translation]

INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Éline Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, since 2009, the municipality of Portneuf has been trying to buy its wharf back from the federal government as part of Transport Canada's port divestiture program, which will end in March. The wharf, which is essential to tourism and business in the region, will fall into disrepair unless funds are invested to upgrade it. Unfortunately, Transport Canada has terminated negotiations. My predecessor promised that, if re-elected, he would secure funding to repair the wharf.

Are we to believe that the department is withholding the funds to punish voters who did not vote for the right party?

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, this program has helped many communities take ownership of their wharves. Unfortunately, all of the money is spoken for, and the program has ended. I would remind the member that, to my knowledge, her predecessor was not a government member either.

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[English]

EMPLOYMENT

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, job creation and economic growth are the priorities of this government. That focus is also incredibly important when it comes to Canadian students.

Would the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development please give the House an update on the status of the Canada summer jobs program and any recent developments on investments for Canadian students?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are excited today to officially launch the Canada summer jobs 2012 program. It is going to help up to 36,000 students get jobs. I would remind members that we recently made an additional \$10 million available to this program and we made it permanent.

What is great about this program is that not only does it help students finance their own education, but it also gives them a chance to develop the skills and experience they need to succeed now and in the future. It is another great way that our government is supporting students by partnering with small businesses, local communities and not-for-profit organizations.

* * *

[Translation]

VETERANS

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, federal services provided to our veterans are under serious threat. Many of these individuals who risked their lives for this country suffer from health problems and are waiting for treatment. Transferring Ste. Anne's Hospital and cutting the Department of Veterans Affairs' budget will result in the loss of 1,800 jobs. Our veterans are not responsible for the Conservatives' mismanagement.

Will this government follow the lead of Great Britain and the United States and treat our war heroes properly?

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, contrary to what the member just said, our government is maintaining veterans' benefits. As for Ste. Anne's Hospital, we will ensure that our veterans continue to receive high quality services in both official languages.

Routine Proceedings

We are doing this and we plan to transfer responsibility for Ste. Anne's Hospital to the Government of Quebec for one very clear reason: we want to maintain high quality services for our veterans. We want to maintain the quality of the services offered to veterans and the public, as well as to maintain good jobs in health care.

* * *

PENSIONS

Mr. Louis Plamondon (Bas-Richelieu—Nicolet—Bécancour, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have been proclaiming that unlike the Liberals, who unabashedly cut transfers, they will not send the bill for their fight against the deficit to Quebec. But that is precisely what they are doing. By increasing the pension eligibility age from 65 to 67, they will force Quebec to make up the difference in income for the less fortunate during that period, which, in the opinion of Quebec minister Julie Boulet, will cost Quebec tens of millions of dollars in social assistance.

Why are the Conservatives so determined to be like the Liberals and make Quebec and the provinces pay for their fight against the deficit?

• (1510)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is not so. What we are going to do is protect the old age security system for our seniors today and for decades to come. We are going to protect them because it is our responsibility to protect the security of our seniors.

* * *

*[English]***PRESENCE IN THE GALLERY**

The Speaker: I would like to draw to the attention of hon. members the presence in the gallery of the Honourable Dale Graham, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick; the Honourable Bill Barisoff, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia; and the Honourable Mary Polak, Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation for British Columbia.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

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BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to designate tomorrow, Thursday, as an allotted day.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Mark Warawa (Langley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the member for Gatineau asked a question during question period she referred to one of the backbench members as being part of the fanatical religious right. We are to show respect for one another and the opinions can be diverse within this House, but I would suggest that it does not help with decorum and it would be disrespectful and unparliamentary to call another member a fanatical member. I ask her to withdraw those comments.

[Translation]

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first, I addressed my comments to the backbench. If the shoe fits, wear it. On Sunday, I am going to be a New England Patriots fanatic and I would not be insulted if someone called me a New England Patriots fanatic. My comments were not addressed to one person in particular but to a group because of their career paths.

I have been accused of being partisan and of working harder for criminals, but you did not see me rise in the House to cry about it. If I said something that was unparliamentary, then I will abide by your ruling, Mr. Speaker; however my comment was fairly tame compared to what we hear from the other side of the House.

[English]

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Human Resources during question period warned all of Canada about the possibility of foreign invaders.

My constituents are going to be very nervous about who is invading Canada, so if she has privileged information, I am wondering if she could share with us information on who is invading Canada so I can warn my constituents.

The Speaker: Question period is over. If the member would like to ask that question on a future day, that would be fine.

The hon. member for Sudbury on a point of order.

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during the S.O. 31 statements by members, my hon. colleague from Newfoundland and Labrador was speaking about a subject related to seals. I believe the hon. member for South Shore—St. Margaret's was making some derogatory comments in relation to the statement.

I would like the hon. member to either come back and apologize or take back those statements. I know the member is a very respected member in the House and I am sure he understands better, so I would like him to bring that apology forward.

The Speaker: We will wait and see if he chooses to come back to do that.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS*[English]***INTERNATIONAL TRADE**

Hon. Ed Fast (Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I have the honour to table in both official languages the treaty entitled "Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America Extending the Softwood Lumber Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America, as Amended", done at Washington on January 23, 2012. An explanatory memorandum is included with the treaty.

Routine Proceedings

● (1515)

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the treaties entitled “International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism” done at New York on April 13, 2005 and “Amendment to the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material”, done at Vienna on July 8, 2005. An explanatory memorandum is included with each treaty.

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COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

HEALTH

Mrs. Joy Smith (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the third report of the Standing Committee on Health in relation to Bill C-314, An Act respecting the awareness of screening among women with dense breast tissue. The committee has studied the bill and has decided to report the bill back to the House without amendment.

* * *

[Translation]

PETITIONS

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition on behalf of people throughout Ontario. The petitioners point out that industrial activities over a number of decades have contaminated the environment and had an impact on health.

[English]

The petitioners request that a royal commission investigate the extent of these impacts, investigate how the precautionary principle should apply and make recommendations on the regulation of industrial processes and the provision of consumer goods.

SUICIDE PREVENTION

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition signed by roughly 200 people from the Waterloo region. The petitioners call on the House of Commons to meet the public health challenges posed by suicide by adopting legislation that would recognize suicide as a public health issue, provide guidelines for suicide prevention, promote collaboration and knowledge exchange regarding suicide, promote evidence-based solutions to prevent suicide and its aftermath, and define best practices for the prevention of suicide.

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a study was undertaken by Mandato et al to evaluate the safety of outpatient treatment in almost 250 patients with multiple sclerosis and CCSVI. The study shows that treatment of CCSVI is a safe procedure, with a 1.6% risk of major complications. The petitioners call on the Minister of Health to consult experts actively engaged in diagnosis and treatment of CCSVI, to undertake phase III clinical

trials in multiple centres across Canada and to require follow-up care.

DNA MISSING PERSONS DATABASE

Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition with strong support on behalf of a constituent in my riding of Palliser. The petitioners feel that the families of missing persons deserve to know the fate of their loved ones, and DNA identification would be a critical tool toward reaching that goal. These 925 petitioners call upon Parliament to enact legislation to create a DNA missing persons database and unidentified human remains database, which would link to the existing national DNA data bank and assist in determining the fate of missing persons.

SHARK FINNING

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present two petitions this afternoon. One is from Canadians from coast to coast, ranging from my riding of Saanich—Gulf Islands and extending into Calgary and Ontario. This petition deals with a matter the House has had before it in a private member's bill, which is to ban the possession, sale and distribution of shark fins in Canada to deal with the very serious depletion of the species globally.

● (1520)

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the other petition I wish to present is primarily from residents of the Montreal region. However, I can share with the House that in holding town hall meetings in every single part of my riding, I have found this to be the number one issue of concern to my constituents. It is about the need to have a fair process, with full and transparent hearings, for the proposed Enbridge supertanker scheme, and ensure that first nations' rights are respected, that the moratorium on oil tankers on the B.C. coastline is respected and that the Government of Canada adopts a neutral stance on this proposal.

FALUN GONG

Mr. Rob Anders (Calgary West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the United Nations special rapporteur on torture reported that 66% of the victims of torture and ill-treatment in China were Falun Gong practitioners. More than 3,448 Falun Gong practitioners have been verified as having been tortured to death to date. The U.S. State Department reported that Falun Gong practitioners constitute half of the people in forced labour camps. Therefore, the petitioners call for an end to the persecution of Falun Gong and for our government to speak out at meetings with top Chinese leaders and at international forums to end their persecution and eradication by the Chinese Communist Party.

ABORTION

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to table two petitions.

The first states that Canada is the only nation in the western world, in the company of China and North Korea, without any laws restricting abortion. The petitioners call on Parliament, as part of its responsibilities, to enact legislation on abortion as quickly as possible and to the greatest extent possible.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is by constituents calling on Parliament to adopt the following policy goals. In the spirit of global solidarity, Parliament should take collective action by signing and implementing a binding international agreement replacing the Kyoto protocol, and it should pursue climate justice by playing a constructive role in the design of the green climate fund under UN governance and demonstrate national responsibility by committing to national carbon emission targets and a national renewable energy policy designed to achieve sustainability.

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QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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MOTIONS FOR PAPERS

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

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

POOLED REGISTERED PENSION PLANS ACT

The House resumed from January 31 consideration of the motion that Bill C-25, An Act relating to pooled registered pension plans and making related amendments to other Acts, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to rise in this chamber today to speak to Bill C-25, an act relating to pooled registered pension plans.

Innovative measures like pooled registered pension plans demonstrate our Conservative government's focus on the issues that matter most to Canadians: economic growth and financial security. This focus has continually achieved results. Under the leadership of our Conservative government, the Canadian economy has maintained the strongest job record in the G7. I'm very proud to say that over 600,000 net new jobs have been created since July 2009. We have also ensured a higher standard of living for Canadian seniors

Government Orders

and our government has provided an additional \$2.3 billion in annual targeted tax relief for seniors and pensioners, with measures like increases in the age credit amount and the introduction of pension income splitting.

While these are all very positive and necessary developments, there remains much to be done. Unlike the members opposite, who continue to promote job-killing tax hikes that threaten the growth of wealth and prosperity in Canada, our government has been working hard at crafting prudent, responsible and creative plans to move Canadians forward in these very fragile economic times.

I have just recently spent some time in Europe and seen first hand the difficulty that the EU is in and I am thankful that this government has ensured that we have stayed ahead of all the G7 nations. However, this requires continual improvement, vigilance, innovation and flexibility in how we manage our economy and the long-term financial prosperity and security of all Canadians well into their golden years. We must encourage all Canadians to save for their retirement and to plan for it early. To help the many Canadians who presently have no plan, the pooled registered pension plan is a vehicle that would help address that very need.

While some of the provinces raised serious concerns about expanding the CPP, there was unanimity among the provinces about pursuing the PRPP framework. Continued consultations with our provincial partners have revealed that a key area to help the Canadian economy move forward is the retirement income system. How else can we explain the fact that there are still Canadians who face a serious risk of not saving enough for retirement? This is especially true for the self-employed and Canadians working in companies that presently do not offer a pension plan. Pension reform is a key priority considering that over 60% of Canadians have no workplace pension.

Existing retirement income structures, while good vehicles, are not the key to addressing this problem. Instead, programs like RRSPs continue to be underutilized. On average, each Canadian has approximately \$18,000 in unused RRSP room. Shortcomings and holes in our pension options pose a real threat as our population ages and more people reach retirement age. With this in mind, our government is proposing new low-cost and accessible pooled registered pension plans. Their introduction would widen the range of retirement savings options for Canadians and allow a greater percentage of our citizens to reach their retirement goals.

Employers would be drawn to the pooled registered plans because these would allow them the opportunity to forego the prohibitive burdens that traditional pension plans generally carry. Instead, a third-party administrator would take on most of the legal and administrative duties associated with the maintenance of the plan. Plan members would rest at ease, knowing that this third-party administration would come from regulated financial institutions that have already demonstrated a capacity to fill fiduciary roles and to act in the best interests of potential plan members.

Government Orders

Canadians joining PRPPs would also gain greater purchasing power, as they would essentially buy into a pool of investments. This would allow members to benefit from greater economies of scale and lower management costs, which would be an improvement over the existing smaller RRSPs. The fact that the regulatory framework of PRPPs would be harmonized between the provinces would also reduce the cost of these measures and remove administrative burdens. PRPPs would also be flexible enough to allow members to easily transfer between plans. This feature would undoubtedly also increase the attractiveness of the plan to small business owners who may find the locking-in provisions of other plans too much of a barrier.

The innovative design and new features of PRPPs have garnered universal praise. All of our provincial partners are enthusiastic about the positive effect of PRPPs on small and medium business. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the Association of Canadian Pension Management and the Canadian Taxpayers Federation have all declared their support for PRPPs.

• (1525)

In my riding of Etobicoke Centre, PRPPs would be a very effective means to help many of my constituents start a pension where many do not have one today. I have a huge number of small and medium-sized businesses that this will apply to perfectly. I know that the people of Etobicoke Centre working in those businesses will benefit from this tremendously.

The introduction of the pooled registered pension plans does not preclude us from continuing on our work on other retirement savings vehicles. However, our government understands that in these economic trying times Canadians cannot afford further increases in CPP contributions. Because of this, the provinces have stalled their debate on reforms to CPP.

Already entrepreneurs are making plans to enrol their employees in new PRPPs.

The Ontario Medical Association recognizes the tremendous positive potential PRPPs will have on essential professions, like doctors, and praises the government for creating savings opportunities that have hereto been unavailable to them.

At this point, the introduction of a new alternative pension plan like PRPPs has been far better received than have other reforms.

Pooled registered pension plans have an enormous potential to improve the retirement security of all Canadians, particularly the 60% of Canadians who do not have the luxury of a workplace pension. This program has already drawn the interest of small business employers and relevant stakeholders, including all of our provincial partners.

In these fragile economic times, sound and innovative policy like that behind the pooled registered pension plans is essential for Canadian competitiveness and for the welfare of our citizens.

• (1530)

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this PRPP proposal reminds me of another debate.

Canadians called for years, and are still calling for, for a national childcare program and the Conservatives gave them \$100. Now Canadians are asking for secure pensions and Conservatives are giving them a weak and voluntary program so they can roll the dice in the marketplace.

There are already private pension investment vehicles out there, so can somebody explain to me how yet another voluntary risky program is an improvement?

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Speaker, I reject entirely the premise of the hon. member's question.

This is not risky at all. As we said, 60% of Canadians do not have a pension plan of their own, especially those who are self-employed or work in small and medium-sized enterprises. This is an important ability for them to save for their future in the long term and well into their golden years.

This government is a very innovative government in that we provide many tools, vehicles and abilities for our Canadian seniors to benefit and live in dignity in their golden years.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would ask if the member would try to put himself in a mindset of an individual who has been working 25, 30 years, maybe in a manufacturing industry, or the restaurant or hospitality industries, and who is now in the age range of 55 to 57 years of age. He or she watching the news now sees the Prime Minister and the government talking about increasing CPP up from age 65 to 67.

I am sure the member can appreciate the nervousness those types of individuals would have, when the government of the day is talking about making those types of significant changes. It is all a part of pensions, whether it is this bill or government pensions, something for which we have long advocated.

Those individuals are looking for a very simple answer. We could not get it today during question period. My challenge to this member is this. Is he prepared to say that the Conservative government will not increase the CPP age from 65 to 67? Could he give that simple guarantee that this will not happen?

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Speaker, I think the hon. member spent too much on his laptop. I was talking about pooled registered pension plans.

I can put myself in the mindset of those individuals. Starting off as a young teen I busbed tables, I cleaned toilets, I was a waiter, I built cars and I delivered furniture. I had so many other jobs that put me through school, but they were very difficult jobs in their time. I understand what Canadians go through.

On the pooled registered pension plans, this is another opportunity for Canadians to save. It is never too late to start planning and saving for retirement, with good prudent tools that the government is providing all Canadians.

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, given the fragile economic times that we currently face, what would an increase in CPP premiums do?

Government Orders

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Speaker, it would be a very difficult time because this is a fragile economy. It also takes two-thirds of the population in order to change that rule. Right now, in very difficult economic times, like those I observed in Europe recently, this would be a burden that we could not fairly place upon Canadians.

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the image that haunts me from the May 2011 federal election, from campaigning in my riding of St. John's South—Mount Pearl in the great province of Newfoundland and Labrador, is that of the seniors I met at their doors, in the middle of the afternoon, in their winter coats. They wore their winter coats inside their homes, decent homes in the suburbs of St. John's and Mount Pearl, because they could not afford to turn up the heat.

The number one issue in my riding is seniors, people living on fixed incomes, people trying to make ends meet.

According to the Conference Board of Canada, 1.6 million seniors across the country live in poverty, and it is slowly and steadily getting worse. The cost of everything is going up, the cost of food, the cost of oil, the cost of gas, except their incomes. Seniors are having a hard time. People are worried about their retirement years. Lately, people are practically panicking about the thought of retirement.

The Conservative government has thrown out the idea of raising the age of eligibility of old age security to 67 from 65. I have to stop myself there and offer an apology to the man in my riding who wrote to me to complain about the term “old age security”, which he finds, “disgusting”. To quote the man further, he said:

—it is very obvious that the term is not only outdated and lacking creativity as a program title, but it is insulting and downgrading to individuals reaching age 65, and are very active and independent members of society.

That is a very good point.

However, my speech is not about OAS, although it is what most Canadians are talking about from coast to coast to coast. I am on my feet in this esteemed chamber today to speak about pooled registered pension plans and to speak against them.

Pooled pension plans are not the solution for the retirement security of Canadians. Why? Because they amount to gambling even more of their retirement savings on failing stock markets.

Here is the \$64,000 question. Will they have a decent retirement income from a pooled registered pension plan? The answer is, who knows. Roll the dice and see, but do not count on it. Do not take it to the bank, do not dare take it to the bank. Is that how we want to see their retirement, as a big fat question mark, as a gamble, as a crashshoot?

Bill C-25 is designed to appeal to the self-employed, as well as workers in small to medium-sized businesses, companies that often lack the means to administer a private sector pension plan. The plan created would be a defined contribution plan, and Canadians need to understand that. Employees will kick in a portion of their salaries into a retirement account where it could be invested in stocks, or bonds or mutual funds. Companies can contribute or they can decide not to. It is up to the individual company. Canadians have to understand there is no guarantee how much of their money will be left when they retire. Their pension will depend upon how well their

money is invested. This is not a defined benefit plan. Again, it is a defined contribution plan.

Anyone who has watched their RRSPs nosedive in recent times knows how incredibly risky it is to tie savings to the stock market. Most people have taken losses in recent years, and that is most people who can afford to put money into RRSPs.

When people think about retirement, they want stability. They want to know that their retirement years will be comfortable years. Forget that with the pooled registered pension plan.

Here is what the New Democrat position comes down. The NDP will not support pooled registered pension plans. Although this is not a pension plan so much as a savings scheme. Canadians need to understand that as well.

● (1535)

The NDP will not support this savings scheme because the Conservatives are offering this up instead of taking real action to protect both existing pensions and enhance pension retirement security for those who lack a workplace pension plan.

An estimated 12 million Canadians do not have a workplace pension plan. That is more than one in three Canadians. Bill C-25, an act relating to pooled registered pension plans, or pooled registered savings schemes, would not give them one.

A New Democratic government would double the guaranteed Canada pension plan. The CPP is a universal program for all Canadians, whether self-employed, in small or large businesses, or in the public or private sector.

Why give workers a savings scheme to roll the dice on their retirement when we could simply expand the CPP? Participation in the CPP is mandatory, meaning its expansion would impact everyone. No one would be left behind. Is Canada not all about leaving nobody behind? That is the New Democrat line. That is what New Democrats are about.

However, the Conservative line is about money for prisons. The Conservative line is about money for fighter jets. Prisons and fighter jets have a higher priority than our seniors who are most vulnerable.

The Conservative's safe streets and communities act was debated here last fall. It would make it much safer for seniors to line up outside of soup kitchens. That is what our country is coming to. Our Canada is changing. The safety net that makes our country a great country, one of the best in the world, is under Conservative attack.

Government Orders

At the recent World Economic Forum in Switzerland, the Prime Minister said, “Our demographics also constitute a threat to the social programs and services that Canadians cherish”. Funny, I would say the Conservatives constitute a threat to the social programs and services that Canadians cherish. The Conservatives pose that threat.

The Conservatives have only been a majority government for nine months and already they have attacked or are in the process of dismantling core services across the country and across my province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Look no further than to the closure of the Maritime Rescue Sub-Centre in St. John's, a service that is vital to our mariners. It is a closure that the regional minister defended by sneaking away in a decoy car.

Look no further than to the defence minister using our search and rescue Cormorant helicopters as a taxi for his holiday on the Gander River.

Look no further than Service Canada and how it is being gutted. Just last week two EI claimants tried to kill themselves because their claims were delayed or rejected.

Look no further than the Canadian seal hunt and how the Conservative government has allowed market after market to ban products from an industry that is central to our heritage and our culture.

Look no further than to our precious seniors. The Conservatives would have it so that the retirement of so many Canadians is a crashout.

Again, the Conservatives constitute a threat to the social programs and services that Canadians cherish.

The Prime Minister also said in Switzerland that there would be major transformations coming to Canada's retirement pension system. The only transformative change that Canada needs in terms of retirement security is to lift every senior out of poverty and expand the Canada and Quebec pension plans. However, all the Conservative government proposes is yet another privately administered voluntary savings scheme like several others already on the market. It is the same old, same old. Canadians are not impressed.

I will conclude with this quote from a constituent in my riding, one of about a dozen who have written my office in recent days concerned about retirement and the Conservative agenda that transformed Canada into a warped shadow of itself, “Young people do not stand a chance in this world. Everything we have worked so hard for to make things better for them is slowly being taken away. What a sad message we are sending”.

• (1540)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have listened to opposition members for a number of months now and I continue to be very puzzled. They speak against every industry that would great jobs, create progress and, ultimately, invest in pension plans and create the wealth of the pension plans we have.

On the one hand, the opposition members want to shut down all the pension plans. Then we hear them talking in terms of the Canada pension plan. We have had conversations with the provinces but the opposition members are missing the important detail of needing the agreement of the provinces in order to move forward. Then they are speaking against something that is an option for our businesses, our employees and employers, which is the pooled registered pension plan. It is a great option, another opportunity.

Perhaps the hon. member could put some clarity to the reason that he would vote against an option that the Canadian Federation of Independent Business supports. Many people say that it is an additional, very important tool for our retirement scheme.

• (1545)

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, there is a very simple answer to that question. The message that all Canadians need to understand about this pooled pension plan is that it is a gamble. We put money into a fund that will be invested into the stock market, into mutual funds, and it is a gamble.

Nobody knows what amount of money they will end up with when they are of the age to retire. It is a gamble. This is not the answer to retirement security. It is as simple as that.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I understand the federal New Democrats' position in that they oppose unilaterally PRPPs.

If the province of Quebec, the province of Manitoba, which is currently governed by New Democrats, or other provinces were to approach the New Democratic Party and say that some form of PRPPs is a good thing, would the NDP then change its position on this issue and allow the bill to go to committee or even allow PRPPs to come into existence?

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, the question is a hypothetical one and I will not answer hypothetical questions.

I will say that registered pooled pension plans are a gamble. Canadians who invest in these plans will have no idea, when they are at the age of retirement, what they will end up with. This is not the answer to the retirement problems we have.

The Canada pension plan and the Quebec pension plan are the answer. We need to support those and make them better. We need to put more money into them so people will have a decent amount to live on when they retire.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my colleague. The government often says that it has no more money and asks how, in this case, it could invest more in the Canada pension plan. I know that tax cuts for big business total \$2 billion. Could we have invested that money in our Canada pension plan?

[*English*]

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, I think there is a hell of a lot of money that we could take from savings.

Government Orders

We could take tens of millions of dollars in savings from the fighter jets that the Conservative government is trying to purchase. We could take untold millions of dollars from tax breaks to big businesses. We could take it all that and put it into the CPP to ensure that all Canadians have a decent retirement plan and will be able to live their retirement years in dignity. Untold millions could be saved.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure today to rise in the House on behalf of the constituents of Northumberland—Quinte West and participate in the debate on Bill C-25, the pooled registered pension plans act.

Much like my colleague from Crowfoot mentioned yesterday, the bill is vitally important to the constituents of Northumberland—Quinte West.

As other members have also highlighted since the debate began on the bill, most rural ridings in this country depend on small and medium size businesses as primary employers. These businesses are vital to the economic growth and continued job creation within my riding. We owe a great deal of gratitude to the hard-working people who ensure that our economy continues to grow. However, not all small and medium size businesses can afford to provide their employees with a third-party pension plan. That is, of course, why this government has introduced Bill C-25.

As most members will recall, in December 2010, the federal and provincial governments agreed on a framework for defined contribution pooled registered pension plans, or PRPPs. The PRPPs would provide Canadians with a new, low cost, efficiently managed, portable and accessible savings vehicle that would help them meet their retirement objectives.

PRPPs are the new kind of defined contribution pension plans that would be available to employers and employees, as well as self-employed individuals. As a result of this legislation, millions of Canadians would be able to save more for retirement and their retirement goals.

This legislation would allow individuals who currently may not participate in a pension plan to make use of a new mechanism that encourages retirement savings. Ultimately, this new pension plan would enable more people to benefit from the lower investment management costs that result from membership in a large pooled pension plan that few small or medium size businesses can afford.

Moreover, in an age of economic uncertainty, PRPPs would provide the people of Canada with a great deal of flexibility considering the fact that PRPPs would allow for an individual to accumulate benefits and carry those benefits forward as individuals transition from job to job. Additionally, there would be assurances that this fund would be invested in the best interests of plan members.

I have listened to the debate over the past few days and I would like to take a few moments now to address some of the concerns the opposition has raised.

Foremost, with respect to the cost of PRPPs, I can inform my hon. colleagues that this government will ensure low contribution costs of PRPPs through their scale and their design. These plans will result in large pooled funds that will enable plan members to benefit from the lower investment management costs associated with such funds.

Second, I have heard some hon. colleagues question why the government does not simply expand existing CPP benefits. My hon. colleagues ought to know, and I am sure they should know or could know if they wanted to I suppose, that changes to the CPP require the agreement of at least two-thirds of the provinces with at least two-thirds of the population of this country. Federal, provincial and territorial ministers of finance have discussed CPP expansion but there is currently no agreement.

This government understands that a fragile economic recovery is not the right time to increase CPP contributions, which would be required if the CPP were expanded. In other words, it would be an additional payroll tax, counterproductive to the beginning of better times as we exit the great economic downturn that commenced in 2008.

In these uncertain times, Canadians need assurances that their government is working diligently to ensure the very best for their economic security and prosperity. This bill is yet another example of this government's commitment to the financial security of retirees in our dear country.

• (1550)

During my budget consultations in January and throughout my meetings in and around the great riding of Northumberland—Quinte West, I heard from constituents who support the Government of Canada's plans with regard to seniors and the improvements we have made to guaranteed retirement security, such as the guaranteed income supplement, the largest increase in the last 20 years.

However, it is not just this government or those we represent who support this bill. Provincial governments, stakeholders and industry leaders alike have come out in support of Bill C-25. For example, the Ontario finance minister, Dwight Duncan, said that the McGuinty government supports, in principle, the federal Conservative PRPP proposal.

Additionally, in 2011, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce said that the PRPPs had the potential to benefit an estimated 60% of Canadians who had either no or insufficient retirement savings. The chamber also believes that PRPPs, which rely on simple and straightforward rules and processes, would give many businesses the flexibility and tools they need to help their employees save for retirement.

Finally, Dan Kelly, vice-president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, said:

A new voluntary, low-cost and administratively simple retirement savings mechanism will allow more employers, employees, and the self-employed to participate in a pension plan. CFIB is particularly pleased that firms will be given a choice as to whether to register for or contribute to a PRPP.

Bill C-25 would provide a new, accessible, straightforward and administratively low cost retirement option for employers to offer their employees. This bill would support individuals who currently may not participate in a pension plan, such as the self-employed or employees of companies that do not offer such a plan or any plan whatsoever.

Government Orders

As such, I will be supporting this legislation on behalf of the good people of Northumberland—Quinte West. I would ask that all my hon. colleagues consider seriously supporting this bill given the benefits of PRPPs that I have highlighted in this speech.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member has touched on a very important aspect of this bill: not all Canadians can afford to retire. That is what he said word for word. With this bill, the worker contributes to his future retirement, but the employer is not required to do so.

A Canadian who is currently unable to contribute to an RRSP does not qualify for the related tax refund. I am talking about hundreds and thousands of Canadians. How will they manage to come up with the money they need for their retirement by making a mandatory contribution to a fund that does not provide a subsidy, rebate or tax credit, as an RRSP does? I would like the member to tell us that.

[*English*]

Mr. Rick Norlock: Mr. Speaker, the contributions to this plan would be tax deferred. I agree that not everybody may be able to afford to put money toward a PRPP. This is just another tool.

Here is one critical aspect of all registered retirement plans. As I listened to other members speak, I heard some questions from across the way about increasing and doubling the Canada pension plan. That requires a lot of co-operation on behalf of the provinces and that is not there right now. What the provinces have said is that this is the plan they think the people of Canada should be offered. Not only that, the small businesses that employ some of these very people, which the good member is talking about, have told us not to raise their payroll taxes. They are already having a hard time just existing and now the government wants to raise their payroll taxes, which the CPP would o.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member made reference to the province of Ontario as one of the provinces that support the bill. I am wondering if the member can provide the House with a list of which provinces are onside with the bill. I am sure the member would acknowledge that without the provincial governments bringing in legislation, the bill itself would not apply to the majority of Canadians.

While he is answering that question, I would also ask him to answer the CPP question I asked one of his colleagues. Is he in a position to guarantee that the Conservative government will not increase the CPP eligibility age from 65 to 67?

• (1600)

Mr. Rick Norlock: Mr. Speaker, those are two very important questions.

In answer to the first question, to the best of my knowledge all my notes and research indicate that all provinces in Canada have indicated they would opt in to the PRPP so the citizens of each province would have the ability to get involved in this great retirement tool that would be available to over 60% of Canadians who are not enrolled in a pension plan.

In answer to the second question, as the member knows, the Canada pension plan is a plan to which all working Canadians contribute. To the best of my knowledge, that plan is actuarially sound, at least into the foreseeable future and generally that means 15 to maybe 25 years. Those are the numbers I am hearing. To the extent that anyone can guarantee anything, I would say that if it is actuarially sound, that pension plan will be there for Canadians who pay into the plan.

I heard a member on the other side say that the NDP would ensure that every single Canadian would be entitled to the CPP. I want to inform him that some very close relatives of mine who, because they had larger families, chose to stay home to raise their children and never worked in the workplace are not eligible for CPP. They are eligible for CPP survivor benefits, but because they did not pay into the plan, they are not eligible. New Democrats need to be very careful.

New Democrats also say the PRPP is a risky plan because it is invested in the stock market and other things. Where do they think the CPP is invested? The CPP is invested in the stock market, although in very cautious investments. The NDP members need to listen to some of their questions because the answers lie with them to be more knowledgeable before they ask them.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out something that is very obvious. When I think of pensions, I think of the wide spectrum of pension options, whether it is the RRSPs or even to a certain degree people's private investments as they look forward to their retirement years.

There are three fundamental cornerstones of our pension safety net: the old age security, the guaranteed income supplement, and the Canada pension plan. Those are the cornerstones and I believe the Government of Canada needs to stand by that.

While the Prime Minister was abroad he announced that the government is looking at making some fundamental changes to that program. Then in response to question after question during question period over the last few days the government has been in denial and does not want to share any bad news with the public. Let there be no doubt there is some bad news, but the government is just not bold enough or courageous enough to be transparent on the issue.

Today I asked two different members for a guarantee. The Prime Minister and other ministers were afforded the opportunity earlier today to answer. I asked if the government would guarantee that it would not increase the age from 65 to 67. Not one of them was prepared to give that guarantee.

That is why Canadians should be concerned. We do not know what the intentions of the government are in terms of making the reforms. We have not been privy to the documents in the Prime Minister's office. I suspect that probably the vast majority of the Conservative MPs are not aware of it either.

Let us not be fooled. The Prime Minister does have an agenda, and I do not think it is a healthy agenda for the cornerstones of our pension program.

Government Orders

This is a great issue, because it shows the differences between the Conservatives, the Liberals and the New Democrats. We have long advocated the importance of these programs. In fact it was Liberal prime ministers, King, Laurier and Chrétien, who built those programs, who put them into play.

We recognize the value and importance of pensions for our seniors, so that seniors can afford the necessities and hopefully a little bit more than just the necessities here and there. That is why we believe very passionately that this is something we are going to fight for.

We believe that we will uncover the truth. We will find out the true intentions of the government. We will continue to press the government on the issue indefinitely, up to the next election if need be. We will circulate petitions and cards. We want Canadians to know that this is something the government is looking at. Canadians want leadership. We are prepared to provide leadership in the fight for this issue, because we believe in this issue. I asked the New Democrats what their position is on this bill.

The pooled registered pension plans do have a role, but there are some fundamental problems with this bill. There are some serious issues. We need to create an opportunity where there is more competition, maybe involve the CPP planners or managers to a certain degree, and have access so there is more competition. Management fees under the PRPPs will be of concern. Whether it is in the House of Commons or in the different legislatures across Canada, it will be of concern.

The Liberals have an open mind toward it. We recognize that many of the provinces, although the government says it is all of the provinces, are in agreement. I hope the government is being honest about that. We will find out over the next year or two. We will wait to see which provinces bring in the necessary legislation to give Canadians the opportunity to participate in this program, if in fact they are in a position to participate.

• (1605)

Let there be no doubt that we are going to continue to fight for those fundamental cornerstones, the CPP, GIS and OAS. However, we are not going to put on blinders and ignore other pension issues that are also important to Canadians.

We want to see stronger leadership on this issue. The Prime Minister should meet with the first ministers on this issue.

Member after member stands and says that we cannot do anything about the CPP because constitutionally we are required to get two-thirds of the provinces onside and they would not agree to it. I wonder to what degree the Prime Minister has really tried to push for that.

We know that before he was the leader of the Conservative Party and a member of the Reform Party, he advocated that we might not even need the CPP, that it could be privatized. I am not convinced that the Prime Minister demonstrated any leadership whatsoever in terms of advocating for a healthier CPP.

We appreciate that the provinces have a role to play. However, the provinces have to recognize the reality of what the population as a whole wants. The pension issue is very important. The Prime

Minister made it that much more important in terms of some of the announcements the Conservatives have made over the last number of days. That is why there is an obligation on the government to come clean in terms of its actual position. Many, including myself, believe that its intentions are to belittle the importance of those three very important fundamental cornerstones to future pensions.

After making an enquiry I was told that in the province of Manitoba over 7,000 seniors 65 years of age and older have to use a food bank on occasion every month. I suspect many of those are from the riding I represent. However, whether I represent them or whether they live in a different riding, it is important that we stand up for seniors who are having a difficult time in trying to make ends meet.

More and more, pharmaceutical costs have been shooting through the roof. Far too many seniors are having to decide between buying the prescribed medication they are supposed to be taking or buying food, which is absolutely essential. Many members might be surprised at the number of seniors who are having to make that decision. I would have expected the government to act on this issue in terms of looking at ways in which to provide more funding for our seniors who are in need.

The government will say that the Liberals did not support the last budget, so the Liberals did not support the last increase to the guaranteed income supplement. Nothing could be further from the truth. We support the increase. In fact, we believe there should have been a larger increase going to our seniors under the guaranteed income supplement because we recognize the hardships they are having to endure.

We want to see a government that believes in protecting seniors' interests, those pension issues that are before us. This will be an issue that I will continue to push on and ask the government to do the right thing in addressing those basic three programs that I have emphasized, the OAS, the GIS, and the CPP. These are very important national social programs that Canadians have grown to respect. Canadians acknowledge how critically important they are to the future of our country.

• (1610)

Sixty-five years of age is what we should be keeping the OAS at. If we can afford some of the expenditures the government is making, surely to goodness the government can come up with a little more money to support the GIS in the upcoming budget, and maybe make our seniors a little better off so they can better afford to get food and not have to make a decision between it and prescription drugs.

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to my friend across the way. One of the things he said was that they would “continue to fight for” things.

Government Orders

Will he continue to fight for an increase in the age limit for seniors before they pay income tax? Will he be ready to fight for and support anyone who raises the guaranteed income supplement, the largest increase in the last 20 years? Will he stand up for senior Canadians who will be able to split their pension? Will he stand up for the fact that this government has taken well over 100,000 seniors off the income tax roll? Over a million Canadians no longer pay any federal income tax. We did more than that: For those who do not pay federal income tax, we reduced the only tax they do pay, the GST, by 2%. Therefore, not only did we remove them from the federal tax rolls but we even reduced the consumption tax they pay.

He sits there and looks at the Speaker and looks into the camera and says his party will “fight for” things, yet they voted against all of those things. He just said they wanted an increase in the next budget for the guaranteed income supplement. We just raised the guaranteed income supplement the most it has been raised in the last two decades, and they voted against it. Surely the member must remember there is a difference between action and rhetoric.

• (1615)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, that is right: there is a difference between action and rhetoric. When a government presents a bill that spends billions and billions of tax dollars, some of that money is actually being spent well. It is a question of priorities.

This is where we really are out of tune with the Conservatives. The Conservatives say, “We need more politicians”, and they are going to spend tens of millions of more dollars on more politicians inside the House of Commons. That is their priority. The NDP members happen to agree with that one. We disagree with them. However, that is a priority for them. If we supported the budget, using the logic the member is using, that would mean we would be supporting the billions of dollars toward the F-35.

We cannot have it both ways. The Liberal party is telling the House what we support in terms of social programming and pensions for our seniors, stating that we support the OAS, the GIS, the CPP. We want to see the GIS increased so that we can take more seniors out of poverty. That is what is important to Canadians. This is not just something that Liberals sitting in the House want, but Canadians as a whole, from coast to coast. They want fewer seniors living in poverty.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. I am sure that other hon. members may wish to put a question to the hon. member for Winnipeg North.

The hon. member for St. John's East.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I know the Liberals want to reduce, for example, the number of seats in the House of Commons for Newfoundland and Labrador, but the debate today is about the pooled registered pension plan.

I want to ask the member what makes the pooled registered pension plan different from the RRSPs we currently have? I ask him because group RRSPs are an available option that has not really been used. In fact, the take-up rate of RRSPs by people eligible for them is around 24%, and the amount they contribute is 6% of what they are allowed. How are PRPPs going to be different? The PRPP seems to have been put forth as a great panacea, yet it does not really solve any of the problems of people who, even now, cannot contribute to

an RRSP. We obviously need a plan where there is a contribution from the employer and employee to actually make it work and provide a decent retirement income.

Would he care to comment on that? Why would we bother with this if RRSPs are already there?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: One of the reasons we have to bother with it is that we have to recognize that, yes, there are some mistakes within the legislation that if amended would make it even better. We also need to acknowledge that we live in a federal state with provinces that have also requested it. When members of the New Democratic Party stand up and speak about the bill, they have already made their determination about it, even if the people of Quebec say, yes, they want to have this option.

That is really what this is: it is an option. How we define that option so that people would be able to maximize the benefit of this option is something that we have some difficulty with in terms of the way in which this government is approaching it, especially when we have provinces across Canada that appear to want to see the legislation.

The best I can tell is that the New Democratic Party is alone inside the House, not necessarily in other provinces. The NDP in provincial jurisdictions seem to be timidly supporting the principle of it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): 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 Halifax, Natural Resources; the hon. member for Etobicoke North, the Environment; and the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso, Service Canada.

Resuming debate, the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, over 60% of Canadians have no workplace pension. That is because many employers do not want the legal or administrative burden of offering them. These costs can be prohibitively high and the benefits inordinately low for a small business with a limited budget and only five or ten employees.

Let us consider or create an example. Joe and Martha Stephens are a married couple without a pension plan. He owns a corner store and she works as a restaurant manager. Neither the restaurant nor the corner store has enough employees to justify the cost of running a pension plan for its people. It is true that RRSPs help as an option, but some people find them too intimidating or time consuming to establish. On average, each Canadian has about \$18,000 in unused RRSP room.

What if thousands of Canadian workers from these kinds of businesses could pool their benefits together to achieve the bulk-buy savings that come with a pooled plan? That would spread the risks and costs among a larger number of people. That is exactly what the pooled registered pension plan offers. Canadians would be able to buy in bulk and get better purchasing power. All of a sudden, the Joes and Marthas and millions of people like them who are on their own could join forces and secure affordable pensions. The design of these plans will be straightforward with simple enrolment and management. A third-party administrator, normally a bank, insurance company or existing pension plan, would be responsible for the administrative and legal duties.

What a relief for a small business owner. These plans would also be subject to the standard pension rules that exist for plans across the sector right now, unlike group RRSPs, which have no similar standard of regulatory practice.

The opposition parties oppose this idea because it is a private sector solution. They believe that government should run and operate everything. They particularly oppose the fact that these pooled pension plans would invest in the stock market. What they fail to realize is that the entire pension system, public and private, relies heavily on the stock market already. Consider the Canada pension plan, 49.6% of which is invested in equities or stocks. These stocks can only pay income into the CPP out of their after-tax profits. Liberals and the NDP want to raise taxes on the very businesses that the CPP invests in. The result would be increased pressures on our public pension system.

For example, the CPP owns \$59 million in Bank of Nova Scotia shares. When that company profits, so does the CPP and, ultimately, so do the millions of Canadians who rely upon it. The CPP also owns \$13 million in TransCanada shares. Does TransCanada ring bells in this place? I ask because TransCanada is the same company that is attempting to build the Keystone pipeline, which, admittedly, would profit that company but would, by definition, also profit its owners of whom \$13 million is represented by the Canada pension plan and the 17 million Canadians who are invested in that plan. The opposition, which opposes this pipeline, is attacking a company that is literally paying its profits into the CPP fund.

The opposition parties are also attacking workplace pension plans, even though they do not realize they are doing so. Take the Canada Post pension plan. During the debate over the postal strike, members of the New Democratic Party simultaneously demanded that the existing pension plan for mail workers be bolstered and that business taxes go up. These concurrent demands are painfully ironic.

• (1620)

The top five holdings of the Canada Post pension plan are the Toronto Dominion Bank, the Royal Bank of Canada, Bank of Nova Scotia, Suncor and Canadian Natural Resources. The banks and oil companies, the twin villains in every left-wing storyline, paid dividends into the pension fund of these unionized workers. These dividends come exclusively from after-tax profits. That means that if we tax these profits more, pensioners will ultimately get less.

On January 1, 2012 the final instalment of our business tax cuts took effect, dropping the rate from 15% to 22%. That is a one-third reduction. By contrast, the NDP election platform proposed

Government Orders

increasing the business tax rate from 15% to 19.5%, a one-third hike. That would be a \$9 billion tax increase on job creators, the companies in which pension funds are invested. Liberals propose a similar hike on these job creators. That would drastically reduce the after-tax earnings left to the pension funds that own these shares.

We should celebrate the fact that workers are invested in capital markets. It is good for everyone involved. People grow their retirement savings while their money provides investment capital to companies that create jobs.

However, the benefit is not just economic but also societal. Politicians always like to divide people along socio-economic class lines, the workers versus capitalists. However, the two are increasingly becoming one and the same due to direct or indirect share ownership by workers. The old utopian socialist dream was for workers to become owners of the means of production through a process of forced collectivization, nationalization and expropriation.

In an ironic twist of fate, it was the capitalistic stock market and not the state that made workers into business owners. Pooled pension plans, tax free savings accounts, lower taxes on businesses and workers give Canadians ownership over their own destinies. Herein lies the sharp difference between this side of the House and that side. Members on that side want to turn workers against business owners; we want to turn workers into business owners. That is the hopeful, uplifting message that our government offers Canadians who aspire to a brighter, more secure and prosperous future.

• (1625)

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with some interest to my colleague's speech.

Once again he has reiterated the Conservative Party's second story about tax cuts for businesses, that the tax cuts for businesses have resulted in greater profits.

His colleague, the Minister of Finance, would suggest that is not the case, that the tax cuts for businesses were to create jobs. One cannot suck and blow at the same time: Either there are profits to be made in otherwise profitable corporations by lowering their tax burden, or they will create jobs. We cannot do both. Which is it?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, in fact the hon. member is wrong. That is the core difference between us and them. We believe that the amount of wealth in a society can actually grow, and that by investment there is more to go around for everyone. They believe there is a finite, static amount of wealth in existence and that the only way to give more to one is by taking away from another, that the only way for one person to move up the ladder is by pulling someone else down.

The answer is that when we cut business taxes, we increase the return on investment for the investors, and that means they invest more because it is a more lucrative proposition.

Government Orders

Who are these investors? They are pension funds. They are people who are retiring and using mutual funds as income for their families, their kids and grandkids. How does this create jobs? It allows more capital so that businesses can hire, purchase new equipment and create more economic activity, all of which put people to work.

The answer is that when we lower business taxes, yes, we increase the return on investment to the pension funds, the mutual funds and the savings that our seniors have invested, and in the process we make it possible for businesses to grow, hire more people and expand opportunity.

**Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I now know why Newt Gingrich likes to give a shout out to Canada. After hearing something like that, he must really like us now.

The member talked about the beauty of having the private sector involved in all of our pensions, most notably, the one which I am particularly fond of, the CPP. The Canada pension plan and its activities with the investment board does this country a good service. The private sector, no doubt, plays a major role, far more major than we even know. The member says that we should celebrate pensions involved in the private sector.

Since the member has been here six years, how come his pension is not involved in the private sector?

• (1630)

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, I personally do not run the pension system around here but I am interested to learn that the hon. member has all of a sudden taken an interest in it. I have never once heard Liberals say that they wanted to cut their own entitlements. In fact, entitlement has been the driving force behind the Liberal Party for approximately a generation. It is the uniting principle of the Liberal Party.

Today we are talking about the pensions of Canadians and the fact that we need a strong, robust business sector in order, not only to employ people today but to pay out the dividends that form the income of our pension plans. That requires a strong, free enterprise economy, and that is what we are providing.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I would ask the parliamentary secretary to perhaps amend his remarks. I think he mistakenly referred to a postal strike. I think he meant the postal lockout.

My question is on other urgent pension matters that I do not know that the government is dealing with. I wish we were able to look at pension issues and not be merely focused on this quite inadequate private sector pooled registered pension plan. Instead, I wish we were able to look at the urgent issue that pensions that were not protected in the private sector be protected as secured creditors in bankruptcy, such that the workers at Nortel would not be wiped out by what happened to them. This is a continual problem in our economy.

Why are we not acting to protect the pensions of people under the superannuation scheme, of retired RCMP, military and civil servants who lose pension benefits to their surviving spouse if they remarry after age 60.

Those are urgent issues and I do not see the government addressing them.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has raised good questions.

I would simply add that in order for any of our pensions, public or private, to function, we need a strong business sector generating the wealth to pay into those funds.

We have created a vibrant business sector by signing nine new free trade agreements, by lowering business taxes by one-third, by cutting red tape and by moving forward with a budget that is coming this spring that will reduce the cost and the burden of government so that we can unleash the strength of free enterprise so that people can aspire to provide for themselves, their families and, eventually, for their retirements.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to thank my NDP colleagues for their various interventions on the government bill before us here today. I think this is a very important subject, one that Canadians are really concerned about. A number of people from my riding have contacted me to share their concerns about their retirement. That is why I wanted to speak here today.

In a democratic country like Canada, the right to retire in dignity after working hard one's entire life is absolutely fundamental. What I mean by "in dignity" is having enough money to pay for groceries, to pay the rent and to pay for health care. The current economic situation, economic projections for the future and our aging population are all crucial factors in determining how we, as a society, should manage our retirement programs.

In that regard, I must commend the government for recognizing the issues that will affect how and when Canadians retire and for trying to come up with solutions to ensure a decent retirement for everyone. Where I disagree with the Conservatives—and where I agree more with the NDP's opinion—has to do with how the government is going about solving the growing problem of access to a decent income when the time comes to retire. Bill C-25, introduced by the government, has many flaws that really need to be examined and understood by Canadians, because, I would remind the House, it is their money on the line.

According to the main points of the bill, the new pooled registered pension plans, PRPPs, a retirement savings vehicle very similar to RRSPs, would enable plan members to pool their funds to reduce costs associated with managing the plan's investments. The bill notes that the benefits of PRPPs are transferable, but that they are not indexed to inflation. These plans are intended for self-employed workers and small and medium-sized businesses that do not have the means to manage a private sector pension plan.

Government Orders

Despite the government's claims, pooled registered pension plans will not enable Canadians to achieve their retirement goals. The plans will not improve income security for retired workers. The plan proposed here is a defined contribution plan, not a defined benefit plan. In this kind of plan, employees set aside funds throughout their working lives, and those funds are invested in stocks, bonds, mutual funds and so on. Investment income depends entirely on market fluctuations. That is an extremely important point. The employees absorb all of the financial risk associated with stock market ups and downs.

If the government made an effort to listen to all of the Canadians whose RRSPs melted away like snow in sunshine in 2008, it would understand that more stable and secure savings options should be made available. People who can tolerate significant risk can turn to the stock market and RRSPs. Worse still, depending on the province, employers could potentially be required to offer this plan to their employees without having to contribute. People already have the option of contributing to a savings plan without employer participation. That is called an RRSP. What more does the government have to offer?

Last November, in its press release announcing Bill C-25, the government said:

...over 60% of Canadians do not have a workplace pension plan. Because of this, our government acted by introducing legislation...that implements pooled registered pension plans... Our Conservative government is delivering PRPPs to offer a new, low-cost and accessible pension option to help Canadians meet their goals.

What low-cost, accessible pension is the Conservative government talking about? Last year, only 31% of eligible Canadians contributed to an RRSP. The rest just could not afford to. Currently, Canadians have \$500 billion in unused RRSP contribution room available.

• (1635)

Let us say it again loud and clear: Canadians do not have access to an affordable and accessible retirement because they have absolutely nothing left at the end of the month to put into savings. And the Conservatives are asking them to take what little they have managed to put aside and put it into investment funds administered by banks, the very banks that have nearly wiped out the global economy, with no guaranteed income and no guarantee that the funds available will see the workers all the way through retirement?

And the Conservatives want these funds to be managed by fund management "experts" at the banks and insurance companies without any limits on the cost of their management fees and bonuses that will be paid out of the pockets of our future retirees?

During a radio interview, the Minister of Industry said:

By pooling retirement savings, PRPPs will allow Canadians to benefit from greater purchasing power. We are talking about economies of scale here. Canadians will essentially be able to buy in bulk. Professional administrators will exercise a duty of care to ensure that the funds are invested in the best interests of the plan members.

In my opinion, the advantage of economies of scale is quite questionable. We should learn from the Australian experience, but this government is again turning a deaf ear, as it did to the warnings from the United States about the omnibus Bill C-10.

Ten years ago in Australia, a similar system provided very disappointing results. Their system was mandatory, with the possibility to opt out, a bit like what the government wants to do here. The Australians came to the conclusion that, even though people saved because it was mandatory, the returns on investment did not outpace inflation.

The report commissioned by the Australian government attributes these discouraging results to the high costs and fees, even though it was thought that competition among the banks would, as we just heard, lead to reduced costs and economies of scale. So much for that argument; it does not fly. Let us have the wisdom to learn from our Australian counterparts and avoid making the same mistakes.

What Canadians want is not another incentive to save more money. The average Canadian is already trying to save and can barely manage. First we have to come up with a solution closer to the source of the problem. Canadians want to have a decent income that will allow them to save. The solution is job creation.

The excessive debt of Canadian households has made the headlines again, and 1.6 million Canadian seniors are living in poverty. By OECD standards, the CPP system is relatively miserly since other similar countries have much more generous public pension plans.

In 2010, one in four workers had a low-wage job. Does the government think that a Canadian who earns \$13 an hour will be able to meet his needs and the needs of his family and contribute to his PRPP, where his hard-earned money will be at the mercy of the stock market as it operates today?

Canadians must understand that the measures proposed here are superficial and risky. The government has not taken the time to carefully consider the problem.

• (1640)

[*English*]

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with great interest to my colleague's speech. I get to do so on regular occasions because we share standing committee duties together.

My question is with regard to the gap between the rich and poor. We have heard countless times in the House, and Statistics Canada releases regular reports, about how the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and how the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. That is mostly due to things like market investments and the way the tax system is currently structured.

I wonder if my colleague could tell me how this particular bill might contribute to either widening or reducing the gap between the rich and the poor in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Mr. Speaker, it is important to understand that, in our society, there are ordinary folks who do not even have the money to contribute to an RRSP each year. They are unable to put money into a TFSA, as the government suggests, to save money. These people are earning salaries of \$28,000, \$30,000 or \$35,000 a year. Some of them have spouses and some have children.

Government Orders

These salaries are below or close to middle-class wages. These people really do not have money to invest. The gap between the rich and poor continues to grow. They cannot even make ends meet, let alone get caught up. I do not understand how the government can think that people will be able to save and invest in a pension plan if the employer and the public purse do not contribute to it.

[English]

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have tied their pension reform agendas to reforming MP pensions. Perhaps it is because I am long way from qualifying for a pension here, but I think MP pensions should be tied to the average pension of Canadians.

Why have Conservatives moved to make MPs decide on their pensions in camera behind closed doors? Many Canadians would see this as being like putting the fox in charge of the henhouse. Why will the Conservatives not let an independent panel decide what should happen with our MP pensions?

[Translation]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Mr. Speaker, we were all surprised to hear that our pension funds are protected with an interest rate of approximately 10%. In any case, the new members are probably not thinking about pension funds yet. They still have some way to go. Canadians should be able to invest in funds that will allow them to earn a profit and they should be able to have a pension that will allow them to buy food and pay their rent when they are retired.

• (1645)

[English]

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my great pleasure to rise in the House today to speak in favour of Bill C-25. Ensuring that Canadians are able to retire with financial security is of paramount importance to our government. Therefore, we are helping millions of Canadians save for retirement more easily by introducing the pooled registered retirement pension plans. This new low cost and accessible option will help more Canadians meet their retirement goals. This is especially important for those working in small business and the self-employed.

PRPPs will improve the range of retirement saving options by providing a new accessible, straightforward administratively low cost retirement option for employers to offer their employees. It will allow individuals who currently may not participate in a pension plan, such as the self-employed and employees of companies that do not currently offer a pension plan, to make use of this new type of retirement vehicle. It will enable more Canadians to benefit from the lower investment management costs that will result from membership in a large pooled plan. It will allow accumulated benefits to move with each individual as he or she moved from job to job. It will ensure that funds are invested in the best interests of the plan members.

What has led to the development of PRPPs? Canada's aging population and the global financial crisis have highlighted the need for retirement income security. In this context, a joint federal-provincial working group was established in May 2009 to undertake an in-depth examination of retirement income. The working group concluded that overall the Canadian retirement income system was

performing well and provided Canadians with an adequate standard of living upon retirement.

However, some Canadian households, especially modest and middle-income households, are at risk of not saving enough for retirement. There are a number of factors that may be contributing to this risk, including declining participation in employer-sponsored registered pension plans. The proportion of working Canadians with such plans has declined from 41% in 1991 to 34% in 2007.

Some Canadians may also be failing to take advantage of the discretionary savings opportunities offered to them through individual structures like RRSPs. Participation in RRSPs reached a peak of 45% of the labour force in 1997, before levelling off to 39% in 2008.

After careful consideration, the ministers of finance agreed to pursue a framework to establish pooled registered retirement pension plans as an effective and appropriate way to help bridge existing gaps in the retirement system.

There are many benefits to PRPPs.

First, PRPPs are an innovative new pension plan designed to address the lack of low cost, large scale retirement savings options available to many Canadians.

Second, some Canadians may be failing to take advantage of the savings opportunities offered to them through individual structures like RRSPs. For an example, on average, each Canadian has over \$18,000 in unused RRSP room.

Third, many Canadians can only access a workplace pension plan if their employers offer one. Many employers do not want the legal or administrative burden of offering a pension plan. As a result, over 60% of Canadians do not have a workplace pension. Recent data suggests that 97.8% of total business establishments are small firms, those that employ 15 people or less, and at this time these firms are unable to efficiently provide a pension plan for their employees due to the costs presented by such plans. As a former business owner, I understand the difficulties associated with the costs and burden of administering a workplace pension plan.

Fourth, the designed features of the PRPP will remove a lot of the traditional barriers that might have kept some employers in the past from offering pension plans to their employees.

Fifth, the design of these plans will also be straightforward to allow for simple enrolment and management. A third party PRPP administrator will take on most of the responsibilities that employers bear in existing pension plans, including the administrative and legal duties associated with administering such a plan.

Sixth, by pooling pension savings, PRPPs will offer Canadians greater purchasing power. They will be able to buy in bulk. Achieving lower prices than would otherwise be available, means they will get greater returns on their savings and more money will be left in their pockets when they retired.

• (1650)

Finally, PRPPs are intended to largely harmonize from province to province, which also allows for lower administrative costs.

Government Orders

Bill C-25 is of great importance to Canadians. We must give Canadians the confidence that when they finally do retire, they will be financially secure. In order to achieve this goal, our government has put forward a strong proposal to provide Canadians with the ability to save for their retirement on their own terms. Our government is working tirelessly to ensure financial stability for all Canadians. Providing proper pension opportunities is one of the ways we can ensure we stay firmly focused on what matters most to Canadians, jobs and a strong economy.

Pooled registered pension plans are a smart and effective way for our people to save for tomorrow today. Therefore, I urge all those present today to join me in supporting Bill C-25.

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member raised the point that most Canadians had upward of \$18,000 in unused RRSP limits.

My experience with RRSPs, and those of my friends and people around my age, is that we are not using up all that space because we do not have the money to invest in the first place because there are no good paying jobs or jobs that come with benefits and defined pensions.

How does the member think that this new pooled pension plan will somehow solve that problem if Canadians do not have enough money to invest in their pensions in the first place?

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is actually making our argument for us. People do not have enough money, ergo they will need a secure pension when they retire.

Right now Canada has the strongest economy in the G8. However, our economic recovery is fragile and can be affected by circumstances beyond our control. Therefore, what we have decided to do as a government is introduce at this point in time a pooled registered retirement pension plan so when Canadians reach the age of retirement and are able to withdraw from their work, they will have a secure income in which to do so and have the confidence to carry on a good quality of life.

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to follow up on a question that I presented this afternoon during question period. I did not get an answer from the minister, so I will ask it of that member.

I had raised the question of whether there would be any changes in policy or legislation that were being contemplated by the government regarding the Old Age Security Act. I raised it from the premise that previous changes had been made to the policy, which affected current beneficiaries of the old age security benefits under the guaranteed income supplement in 2010.

The government has said that there will be no changes that affect current pensioners. I could not get an answer from the minister though when I asked if the government was contemplating any changes in either policy or legislation to the OAS Act. Is the answer yes or no?

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, it is strange that the member would ask me such a question. The focus of our remarks today are on the PRPP. Bill C-25 is about that. However, he did reference that he wanted to ask it of the government. I would suggest that the government is the Prime Minister and the cabinet and that he has

ample opportunity during question period to pose his questions to the Prime Minister or to the appropriate members of cabinet.

• (1655)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, a number of small businesses have the option of signing their employees on to group RRSPs, and many do. What would the advantage be of a company signing on with the pooled registered pension plan as opposed to going the group RRSP route?

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, the member's question is very insightful. I would suggest that the advantage of going the PRPP route as opposed to being able to fill out one's full complement of RRSP or group RRSP is like comparing apples and oranges.

The PRPP represents a payment at time of retirement, without having to contribute as much income as one would into an RRSP. It is much more cost-effective and would also cover those people who just do not have enough discretionary income either at the employer level or employee level to contribute to an RRSP or a group RRSP. Therefore, the PRPP is certainly the way to go and much more cost-effective for everyone concerned.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a great honour, as always, to stand and represent the people of Timmins—James Bay.

The voices of the people of Timmins—James Bay are once again being shut down by a government that is afraid to deal with the pension crisis that it is creating. The government has shut down debate on an issue that is fundamental to the future of Canadians, their pensions. The government shows amazing contempt for the democratic process.

However, I think the government really wants to get the pension issue off the table as fast as possible. When people look at this so-called pension plan, the average Canadian knows this is a scam and it is not going to fly.

Pensions were the first thing I learned about in politics. My granny Angus lived in a little room upstairs in our townhouse. She was a mining widow. Every month when that Canada pension cheque came in, she would come downstairs, hold up that cheque and say, "The NDP fought for this." I used to think my grandmother was a little crazy. I would say, "Nanny, there has always been a pension." She would say, "No, there wasn't always a pension. People fought for that pension."

Government Orders

My grandfather, Charlie Angus, worked 38 years at the largest gold mine in North America. Those men had no pensions because it was expected that they were going to die young. They were going to die from silicosis, emphysema or heart failure in their early forties. That is what happened to all the immigrant miners. They were going to die in a run of muck or a rock blast. They did not have to worry about pensions. However, if they lived long enough, they were stuck. Charlie Angus went to work and died on the shop floor at the Hollinger mine when he was 68 years old. The miners worked until they died. That was the way it was when I was born.

Sixty-eight years old. I was thinking about what a different world that was, when my grandfather had to be at the mine at 68. Just a few months ago, at a Tim Hortons in Timmins, a guy came up to me and said, "I can't live on my CPP. I worked my whole life as a contract miner. I'm going back underground." I said, "How old are you, sir?" He said, "I'm 68 years old."

The pension crisis that exists in our country is not this fabricated crisis that the Prime Minister told the millionaires about in Davos. The pension crisis in this country is that we have a system that works but that citizens are not able to pay enough into it. The CPP is an excellent, well funded system. It is the simplest and the lowest cost. It guarantees people the chance to retire in dignity. So, in my riding 68-year-olds would not have to go back to work.

When the Prime Minister spoke to millionaires in Switzerland, the message he delivered to them was that our senior citizens are living too high off the hog. He did not have the guts to come back to tell senior citizens in this country what he was going to do.

We have been trying to get a straight answer from this attack on old age security. Old age security represents the poorest people. It delivers the most basic pension. Pension plans are built over 30 years. Over the last 30 years, we have had maybe 15 years of Liberal and 15 years of Conservative governments. Did they not see the demographic crisis that now, suddenly, the Prime Minister has become aware of? Did they not see that these senior citizens were getting too much? We are trying to get an answer as to how this could be.

The human resources minister said today that we have to worry about future invasions of our country. Is this conspiracy stuff? It has been 150 years since the Fenians came over the border at Buffalo and fired off a few muskets. Are the Conservatives saying that our senior citizens should not be getting old age security because the human resources minister is worried about future invasions?

The Prime Minister has floated the trial balloon and has now gone to ground. He sent out my favourite conspiracy theorist, the Ron Paul guy, the parliamentary secretary, who told us today that one of the companies that is behind the Keystone development has money in pensions. If we increase pensions it is going to cost that company money; he considers this another attack by the NDP on the Keystone pipeline. I was thinking, is this crackpot bizarre republicanism or is this just the normal course for the Conservatives?

Is this man anywhere close to reality? I do not think he has ever had a real job. He has always lived within this Conservative attack bubble. However, my people back home do have real jobs.

● (1700)

I hear Conservative backbenchers saying that the problem with RRSPs is that people have unused capacity. I was a contract worker. I raised three children on various jobs. I was never able to save enough money for RRSPs so my capacity was "taken up". When people go from contract to contract, which goes for most in my generation, in between the contracts they use up their savings. That is the reality. I am now 50 years old. I am almost there, but people can see from my grey hair that I am older than a lot of the demographic. In my generation, people have not paid into a pension plan. They have been trying to save in RRSPs.

Now people are being told the government is going to change the name of the RRSP and the best thing is, the employer might contribute. It is not that the employer will contribute. The government will just change the name. If RRSPs worked, it would be sufficient, but they have not worked. I am sure my colleagues have friends with private sector savings who, like many of my friends, lost 40% of the value of those savings in 2008 when the recession hit. We are possibly going into years of negative real growth. Yet we are being told to tell people to put more money into the RRSP system and that the system will deal with it.

Meanwhile, we have a system that works. We have the CPP. When talking to pension experts, the one thing they say is that the CPP works and we should allow workers to contribute more to the CPP. That is a reasonable solution. However, that is a public solution. The government does not believe in the things that have made this country work. We put our resources together and created a public pension plan that is sustainable and doable. CPP has protected Canadians for 40 years. Pension experts say that is where we need to go, but that is where the government does not want to go.

What have the Conservatives done? They have come up with this glorified RRSP program, but they do not want to debate it. They do not want Canadians to hear about it. It is our job as members of Parliament to stand in the House and represent the concerns of our people. The Conservatives do not seem to like it; it might bother the attack message crew around the Prime Minister. However, that is the parliamentary Westminster tradition. Canadians can hear the debates and judge whether they make sense. Yet forcing through a fundamental change on pensions within 24 hours of introducing this bill would be denying Canadians a perspective on a bill that is going to affect their future.

Government Orders

I would say that the Conservatives know this plan does not hold water. They know Canadians are not stupid and are concerned about their future. When I go back to Timmins—James Bay, I hear more and more about financial insecurity. People do not have what they need. These are people who have done it right, but despite having been careful their whole lives, it is just not there for them. We have a chance to fix this for the next generation, but instead we are seeing a destabilization of old age security. We are seeing an attempt to create this supposed private solution where nobody really has to contribute, nobody really has to participate. It is there to help people add to their savings.

CPP has lots of unused capacity, if we are going to use Conservative terms. In fact, if we compare with the United States, the senior benefit there is \$30,000 per year while the maximum in Canada is \$12,000. People cannot live on \$12,000 a year. They cannot pay their rent on \$12,000 a year. Even if we add old age security to that, which is a maximum of less than \$7,000 a year, it is still far below. We already have a system that works. It is low cost. It does not create any hassle for the employers because the contribution is already being deducted.

If we allow working people and the self-employed, the contract workers, to make contributions to the CPP, a publicly pooled pension plan, there will be the level of security that a previous generation of Parliament sought for this generation. It will continue to the next generation. However, if we continue to shut down the ability of Parliament to do its work, we are going to get shoddy work. That is what we are seeing from the government.

• (1705)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, there are stories across the country of how our parents' generation had to work hard without any notion of a pension.

I want to mention something. I hope the hon. member will not mind. The hon. member for York Centre made the same error. I would like to remind us all that we in this Parliament are the Government of Canada. The Prime Minister and the cabinet are Privy Council members, but as a Parliament we are the government. We too often refer to Conservative Party members, whose membership makes up all of Privy Council, as though they are the whole of government. We here as opposition members are also government.

In the view of the hon. member and in the view of the Conservative Party members, would Bill C-25 work for the mobility of workers? About half of Canadian workers have had five or more employers since they started working. Would this plan be viable when the contributions from employers are voluntary and when workers are so mobile?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, the member makes an excellent point. The new reality of working is that people move from job to job. The days of private pensions have been pretty much deep-sixed. However, people can bring CPP contributions with them.

I do not see anything in this bill that is different from RRSPs except the claim that employers can contribute. If employers really wanted workers to stay, they would say, "Hey, come work for me and I will contribute to your RRSP." That is not going to happen.

We have a system that works, that is mobile and that people can take with them. Then we have this chimera that is being held out there. The government is trying to push it through as quickly as possible because my dear colleagues in the Conservative Party could not go home and sell this to their people.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in order for this bill to be effective provinces have to get behind it, accept it and pass provincial legislation. It would appear that a good number of the provinces are on side and want to see this bill passed.

My question for the member is, if provinces like Quebec, Manitoba and British Columbia are showing support for this bill, is there any obligation whatsoever on the part of the NDP to allow this bill to go to committee?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, our obligation is to represent the working people of this country and the people who need pensions.

The fact is that the government barely made any effort to deal with the provinces. If some provinces think that we will take a stinky deal over a good deal, that is not good enough. The fact is that debate has been shut down here after less than 24 hours.

My colleague might want to go home early, and that is fine for him. I am here to debate this bill. I am here to find out what works in this bill and what fails in this bill. There is no reason that I should be expected to stand up in this House and vote for a bill that has been given less than 24 hours of debate.

My colleague might think that it is great that we can get out in time for an early supper or drinks, but this is about our pensions. I am here to debate it. I am here to make sure this job is done right.

• (1710)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, earlier today I posed the question that the member opposite brought up: why could we not just make voluntary payments to the CPP. The reply was that the administration costs would be far higher and there would be less flexibility than with the pooled registered pension plans.

My question for the member opposite is, why would he want more of people's money sunk into administration instead of keeping the money in their pockets and saving more for the future?

Mr. Charlie Angus: Mr. Speaker, I like that my hon. colleague has come up with the money under the mattress theory for savings. The reason CPP works is that the contributions come off people's cheques. They go in the CPP to be used later. That is why it works. If we had a voluntary CPP, there would be no pension plan and everybody would be scrambling.

The member wants the keep the money in their pockets plan. We have had that in the past. It is called money under the mattress or burying something in the back yard. However, if we are going to have a system that people can retire on, we need a system that works. If my colleague thinks that CPP does not work, then maybe the Prime Minister should go to Davos and tell the millionaires that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we resume debate, I will have to let the member for Selkirk—Interlake know that we will need to interrupt him at 15 minutes after the hour.

Government Orders

The hon. member for Selkirk—Interlake.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to Bill C-25.

After listening to the debate in the House this afternoon, I must say that I was quite shocked at some of the comments I heard coming from across the floor. The suggestion that all our problems with pension plans can be solved by just increasing the CPP is a misleader. We know that when the finance ministers met and discussed the potential of increasing CPP premiums and benefits that there was no consensus. To have a change in CPP, we need to have the agreement of two-thirds of the provinces representing two-thirds of Canadians. However, there was not enough consensus around the table to move forward on increasing benefits in the Canadian pension plan. That is why we came forward with the pooled registered pension plan, which is being supported in principle by all provinces. There is unanimous support to go forward with the pooled registered pension plan.

In talking to people in Selkirk—Interlake and the businesses up and down the main streets throughout the 71 communities in my riding, they are glad that they may now have some options. Unlike a lot of places in urban Canada, not a lot of big businesses in rural Canada offer employee pension plans. By not having that employer-employee contribution going into a pension program, people have had to use their own savings or go into their RRSPs. Now there would be an option and the ability for all these small businesses to offer a pension.

If we look at the statistics, small and medium size businesses represent over 90% of the businesses in Canada. They employ 67% of Canadians. A lot of those businesses are owned by self-employed individuals. Now they would have an opportunity to participate in a larger fund that would pool their dollars and cut down on the administration cost so that they could make investments for retirement.

Over the break in January, I met with some of my chambers of commerce. I held some prebudget consultation meetings. Even last fall, in some meetings with municipal councils and chambers of commerce, they were talking about a pooled registered pension plan program. They see this as a benefit. They see this as an opportunity to help retain employees because their employees would now have an opportunity to participate in a pension program rather than having to relocate. We see a lot of people going after more lucrative employment opportunities and leaving for other areas of Canada and urban centres. That is the wrong approach for rural Canada.

By having the government move forward on the PRPP, small and medium size businesses and the self-employed would have a competitive opportunity to keep people in their communities. On top of enjoying the great attributes of rural Canada, people would have the ability to have the same potential for retirement earnings and be able to then retire in those communities. It would allow them to continue having the community services, the schools for their children and to make use of their recreational facilities with that taxpayer base through property taxes. Therefore, we need to maintain that population base and this is another tool that would allow us to do it.

I encourage everyone, when we vote in a few minutes on Bill C-25, to support it.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order. It being 5:15 p.m., pursuant to an order made on Tuesday, January 31, 2012, it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the second reading stage of the bill now before the House.

[*English*]

The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): In my opinion the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Call in the members.

• (1755)

[*Translation*]

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

(*Division No. 106*)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Aglukkaq
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison	Ambler
Ambrose	Anders
Anderson	Andrews
Armstrong	Ashfield
Aspin	Bateman
Bélanger	Bellavance
Bennett	Benoit
Bernier	Bezan
Blaney	Block
Boughen	Braid
Breitkreuz	Brison
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)	Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Brown (Barrie)	Bruinooge
Butt	Byrne
Calandra	Calkins
Cannan	Carmichael
Carrie	Casey
Chisu	Chong
Clarke	Clement
Coderre	Cuzner
Daniel	Davidson
Dechert	Del Mastro

Private Members' Business

Devolin
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Dykstra
Eyking
Fast
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Fortin
Galipeau
Garneau
Glover
Goldring
Goodyear
Gourde
Harper
Hayes
Hillyer
Hoeppner
Hsu
Jean
Karygiannis
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kerr
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lamoureux
Lebel
Lemieux
Lizon
Lukiwski
MacAulay
McCallum
McGuinty
McLeod
Menzies
Miller
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Norlock
Obhrai
Oliver
Pacetti
Payne
Plamondon
Preston
Raitt
Rathgeber
Reid
Richards
Rickford
Saxton
Schellenberger
Shea
Shory
Smith
Sorenson
Stanton
Sweet
Toet
Trost
Trudeau
Tweed
Valcourt
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Warawa
Watson
Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)
Williamson
Woodworth
Young (Oakville)
Zimmer — 189

Dreeshen
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Easter
Fantino
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Foote
Fry
Gallant
Gill
Goguen
Goodale
Gosal
Grewal
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hiebert
Hoback
Holder
James
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kent
Komarnicki
Lake
Lauzon
Leef
Leung
Lobb
Lunney
MacKenzie
McColeman
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Menegakis
Merrifield
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Nicholson
O'Connor
Oda
Opitz
Paradis
Penashue
Poilievre
Rae
Rajotte
Regan
Rempel
Richardson
Ritz
Scarpaleggia
Sgro
Shipley
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor)
Sopuck
St-Denis
Strahl
Tilson
Toews
Trottier
Truppe
Uppal
Valeriotte
Van Loan
Wallace
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to
Sky)
Wilks
Wong
Yelich
Young (Vancouver South)

Chisholm
Chow
Cleary
Côté
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Day
Donnelly
Dubé
Dusseault
Garrison
Genest-Jourdain
Godin
Grogue
Harris (St. John's East)
Hughes
Jacob
Kellway
Larose
Laverdière
Leslie
Mai
Martin
Mathysen
Michaud
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Nantel
Nunez-Melo
Patry
Perreault
Quach
Ravignat
Rousseau
Savoie
Sims (Newton—North Delta)
Stoffer
Thibeault
Tremblay

Choquette
Christopherson
Comartin
Crowder
Davies (Vancouver East)
Dionne Labelle
Doré Lefebvre
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Freeman
Genest
Giguère
Gravelle
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Hassainia
Hyer
Julian
Lapointe
Latendresse
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Liu
Marston
Masse
May
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Nicholls
Papillon
Péclet
Pilon
Rafferty
Raynault
Sandhu
Sellah
Stewart
Sullivan
Toone
Turmel — 92

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Finance.

(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

INFRASTRUCTURE

The House resumed from December 14, 2011, consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on Motion No. 270.

● (1805)

(The House divided on the motion, which was negated on the following division:)

(Division No. 107)

YEAS

Members

Allen (Welland)
Aubin
Benskin
Blanchette
Boivin
Boulerice
Brosseau
Cash

NAYS

Members

Angus
Ayala
Bevington
Blanchette-Lamothe
Borg
Boutin-Sweet
Caron
Chicoine

Allen (Welland)
Angus
Ayala
Bennett
Bevington
Blanchette-Lamothe
Borg
Boutin-Sweet
Brosseau
Caron

Andrews
Aubin
Bélangier
Benskin
Blanchette
Boivin
Boulerice
Brisson
Byrne
Casey

Private Members' Business

Cash
Chisholm
Chow
Cleary
Comartin
Crowder
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Day
Donnelly
Dubé
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Easter
Foote
Fry
Garrison
Genest-Jourdain
Godin
Gravelle
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Hassainia
Hughes
Jacob
Karygiannis
Lamoureux
Larose
Laverdière
Leslie
MacAulay
Marston
Masse
May
McGuinity
Michaud
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Nantel
Nunez-Melo
Papillon
Péclet
Pilon
Rae
Ravignat
Regan
Sandhu
Scarpaleggia
Sgro
Sims (Newton—North Delta)
Stewart
Sullivan
Toone
Trudeau
Valeriotte — 123

Chicoine
Choquette
Christopherson
Coderre
Côté
Cuzner
Davies (Vancouver East)
Dionne Labelle
Doré Lefebvre
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dusseau
Eyking
Freeman
Gameau
Genest
Giguère
Goodale
Grogulé
Harris (St. John's East)
Hsu
Hyer
Julian
Kellway
Lapointe
Latendresse
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Liu
Mai
Martin
Mathysen
McCallum
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Nicholls
Pacetti
Patry
Perreault
Quach
Rafferty
Raynault
Rousseau
Savoie
Sellah
Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor)
St-Denis
Stoffer
Thibeault
Tremblay
Turmel

NAYS

Members

Ablonczy
Adler
Albas
Alexander
Allison
Ambrose
Anderson
Ashfield
Bateman
Benoit
Bezan
Block
Braid
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Barrie)
Butt
Calkins
Carmichael
Chisu
Clarke
Daniel
Dechert
Devolin
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Fantino
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)

Adams
Aglukkaq
Albrecht
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Ambler
Anders
Armstrong
Aspin
Bellavance
Bernier
Blaney
Boughen
Breitkreuz
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Bruinooge
Calandra
Cannan
Carrie
Chong
Clement
Davidson
Del Mastro
Dreeshen
Dykstra
Fast
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)

Fortin
Gallant
Glover
Coderre
Gosal
Grewal
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hiebert
Hoback
Holder
Jean
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kent
Komarnicki
Lake
Lebel
Lemieux
Lizon
Lukiwski
MacKenzie
McLeod
Menzies
Miller
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Norlock
Obhrai
Oliver
Paradis
Penashue
Poilievre
Raitt
Rathgeber
Rempel
Richardson
Ritz
Schellenberger
Shipley
Smith
Sorenson
Strahl
Tilson
Toews
Trottier
Tweed
Valcourt
Van Loan
Wallace
Warkentin
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)
Wilks
Wong
Yelich
Young (Vancouver South)

Galipeau
Gill
Goguen
Goodyear
Gourde
Harper
Hayes
Hillyer
Hoepfner
James
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kerr
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lauzon
Leaf
Leung
Lobb
Lunney
McColeman
Menegakis
Merrifield
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Nicholson
O'Connor
Oda
Opitz
Payne
Plamondon
Preston
Rajotte
Reid
Richards
Rickford
Saxton
Shea
Shory
Sopuck
Stanton
Sweet
Toet
Trost
Truppe
Uppal
Van Kesteren
Vellacott
Warawa
Watson
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Williamson
Woodworth
Young (Oakville)
Zimmer — 158

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion lost.

* * *

NATIONAL FLAG OF CANADA

The House resumed from January 30 consideration of the motion that Bill C-288, An Act respecting the National Flag of Canada, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at second reading stage of Bill C-288.

● (1815)

[Translation]

(The House divided on the motion, which was agreed to on the following division:)

*Private Members' Business**(Division No. 108)*

Zimmer — 155

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy
 Adler
 Albas
 Alexander
 Allison
 Ambrose
 Anderson
 Ashfield
 Bateman
 Bernier
 Blaney
 Boughen
 Breitreuz
 Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
 Bruinooge
 Calandra
 Cannan
 Carrie
 Chong
 Clement
 Davidson
 Del Mastro
 Dreeshen
 Dykstra
 Fast
 Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
 Gallant
 Glover
 Goldring
 Gosal
 Grewal
 Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
 Hiebert
 Hoback
 Holder
 Jean
 Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
 Kent
 Komarnicki
 Lake
 Lebel
 Lemieux
 Lizon
 Lukiwski
 MacKenzie
 McLeod
 Menzies
 Miller
 Moore (Fundy Royal)
 Norlock
 Obhrai
 Oliver
 Paradis
 Penashue
 Preston
 Rajotte
 Reid
 Richards
 Rickford
 Saxton
 Shea
 Shory
 Sopuck
 Stanton
 Sweet
 Toet
 Trost
 Truppe
 Uppal
 Van Kesteren
 Vellacott
 Warawa
 Watson
 Sky Country)
 Weston (Saint John)
 Williamson
 Woodworth
 Young (Oakville)

Adams
 Aglukkaq
 Albrecht
 Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
 Ambler
 Anders
 Armstrong
 Aspin
 Benoit
 Bezan
 Block
 Braid
 Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
 Brown (Barrie)
 Butt
 Calkins
 Carmichael
 Chisu
 Clarke
 Daniel
 Dechert
 Devolin
 Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
 Fantino
 Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
 Galipeau
 Gill
 Goguen
 Goodyear
 Gourde
 Harper
 Hayes
 Hillyer
 Hoepfner
 James
 Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
 Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
 Kerr
 Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
 Lauzon
 Leef
 Leung
 Lobb
 Lunney
 McColeman
 Menegakis
 Merrifield
 Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
 Nicholson
 O'Connor
 Oda
 Opitz
 Payne
 Poilievre
 Raitt
 Rathgeber
 Rempel
 Richardson
 Ritz
 Schellenberger
 Shipley
 Smith
 Sorenson
 Strahl
 Tilson
 Toews
 Trottier
 Tweed
 Valcourt
 Van Loan
 Wallace
 Warrentin
 Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to
 Wilks
 Wong
 Yelich
 Young (Vancouver South)

NAYS

Members

Allen (Welland)
 Angus
 Ayala
 Bellavance
 Benskin
 Blanchette
 Boivin
 Boulerice
 Brison
 Byrne
 Casey
 Chicoine
 Choquette
 Christopherson
 Coderre
 Côté
 Cuzner
 Davies (Vancouver East)
 Dionne Labelle
 Doré Lefebvre
 Duncan (Etobicoke North)
 Dusseault
 Eyking
 Fortin
 Fry
 Garrison
 Genest-Jourdain
 Godin
 Gravelle
 Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
 Hassainia
 Hughes
 Julian
 Kellway
 Lapointe
 Latendresse
 LeBlanc (LaSalle—Énard)
 Liu
 Mai
 Martin
 Mathysen
 McCallum
 McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
 Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
 Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
 Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
 Nicholls
 Pacetti
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 Perreault
 Plamondon
 Rae
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 Sandhu
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 (sor)
 Sims (Newton—North Delta)
 Stewart
 Sullivan
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 Trudeau
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Andrews
 Aubin
 Bélanger
 Bennett
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 Blanchette-Lamothe
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 Boutin-Sweet
 Brosseau
 Caron
 Cash
 Chisholm
 Chow
 Cleary
 Comartin
 Crowder
 Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
 Day
 Donnelly
 Dubé
 Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
 Easter
 Foote
 Freeman
 Garneau
 Genest
 Giguère
 Goodale
 Grogg
 Harris (St. John's East)
 Hsu
 Jacob
 Karygiannis
 Lamoureux
 Larose
 Laverdière
 Leslie
 MacAulay
 Marston
 Masse
 May
 McGuinty
 Michaud
 Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
 Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
 Nantel
 Nunez-Melo
 Papillon
 Péclet
 Pilon
 Quach
 Rafferty
 Raynault
 Rousseau
 Savoie
 Sellah
 Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly, the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage.

Private Members' Business

(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)

[English]

The Speaker: It being 6:19 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

* * *

• (1820)

PARLIAMENT OF CANADA ACT

The House resumed from November 2, 2011, consideration of the motion that Bill C-306, An Act to amend the Parliament of Canada Act (political affiliation), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, whenever the issue of parliamentary reform comes up for debate, it is always nice to be able to express what I think are important issues. I hope people will be somewhat generous in terms of relevancy. We are in an interesting time in that we have seen a lot of things happen with respect to parliamentary reform. I want to focus on two aspects.

One is the need for reform in terms of the number of members of Parliament. We had a good discussion about that just before winding down the fall sitting. It is something I would not mind reviewing. Members will recall that the government decided to increase the size of the House of Commons. It was interesting to hear the different opinions from the three political parties on that issue. We have always maintained that given today's reality and priorities this was not necessary. Without any hesitation whatsoever I would suggest that the vast majority of Canadians do not support the need for parliamentary reform in the sense of increasing the size of the House of Commons.

When we talk about parliamentary reform, we should be talking about how best to meet the needs of our constituents. There are different ways in which the government could have addressed the issue. We were disappointed that the government decided that the short answer to this issue was to increase the size.

We could just as easily have seen an increase in the resources available to individual MPs as opposed to increasing the overall number of MPs. With additional resources members of Parliament would be able to better serve their constituents.

There is always a great deal of discussion in terms of first past the post, plurality of votes, multi-member ridings, and so forth. I have always found these debates to be of great interest. A number of years ago I had the opportunity to participate in a small task force on parliamentary reform. There is a great deal of interest from the public to participate.

In my discussions I found that people appreciate one member, one ward. People appreciate that we operate with a first past the post system, even though there is a great deal of interest in individuals acquiring more than 35% or 38% of the vote in order to ultimately win. There could be a runoff ballot. I have heard many discussions in regard to that. There is a great deal of merit in that.

This is not the first time I have seen the issue that is before us. The first time I saw this specific issue was in the Manitoba legislature.

The New Democratic Party introduced it. When it got to the committee stage, it was interesting to see the number of presenters who came forward. A former New Democrat, Sid Green, talked about how government cannot take away the right of a member of Parliament or an MLA to do what the member thinks is the right thing to do in terms of crossing the floor. Winston Churchill crossed the floor on several occasions, I am told. I do not think we would find very many Canadians who would suggest that Winston Churchill was a poor politician or not a wise politician. Winston Churchill is probably one of the most recognized parliamentarians worldwide because of some of the things he did during World War II.

• (1825)

There were cases presented in the committee that challenged whether or not the law being proposed by the NDP was constitutional. I would have had a very difficult time if my political party was trying to force me into a position which was completely at odds with my constituents.

In the past we have seen individuals make good decisions in terms of serving their constituents. Crossing the floor would be a very difficult decision to make, but I find it rather odd that a party that wants to come across as being a grassroots party would suggest that this would be an illegal activity.

There are other ways to do it. I made reference to the task force in Manitoba in which I participated. Another way would be recall. Public support could be gained for other ways.

At the end of the day, when we talk about members of Parliament and their ability to act on what is important, it is important that they have the opportunity to leave a political entity if they think that political entity is not meeting the needs of their constituents first and foremost.

The most significant reference I could make is that of Winston Churchill. If we looked at the British Commonwealth as a whole, we would find many cases where it has been justified and individuals have been re-elected after crossing the floor.

I have had exchanges with individuals here in Ottawa as well as in Manitoba. I have received responses that have been fairly positive toward this. All political parties have benefited by it. In Manitoba, I believe there was a Liberal MLA who went over to the New Democratic Party. I do not think there were any New Democrats who complained about it at the time. In fact, I believe they felt the individual had a right to do so.

Ultimately, we have to take into consideration that there is a Constitution. I believe individuals have a right to do what they believe is in the best interests of their constituents. If that means participating in another caucus, they should be allowed to do so.

However, when we talk about electoral reform, there are other priorities that are more important than this issue. I would like to extend to members the challenge of how to get more people to participate in elections. I would welcome a lot more discussion on that.

I have made the suggestion to put the choice of “none of the above” on the ballot. I have also suggested, and Manitoba has adopted, allowing more people to vote in places such as malls where people convene.

I am more interested in trying to engage people in participating in the electoral process and opening up nominations than what this bill is attempting to do. It is trying to dishonour or discredit the political process that has worked exceptionally well. The system that we have has worked exceptionally well. By discrediting it, we are ultimately discrediting the democratic process. I would suggest—

● (1830)

The Deputy Speaker: Resuming debate. The hon. member for Louis-Saint-Laurent.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is with a touch of humility that I rise here today in support of Bill C-306, introduced by my hon. colleague from Pontiac. I mentioned humility because Bill C-306 led me to reflect on my role as a member of Parliament, and more importantly, on the principles that motivated me to run in the last two elections. It has always been clear to me, but to sum it up in a speech and then articulate it here in the House requires some reflection.

According to this bill, if a member decides to change parties, this decision would automatically lead to a byelection in the riding of the floor crosser. Or else the floor crosser would have to sit as an independent until the end of that Parliament. The spirit of this bill, of course, is meant to protect the democratic choices of Canadians. In light of what has already been said about this bill on both sides of the House, it seems to me that there are two conflicting opinions regarding the role of an MP. Once again here today, these conflicting views will emerge, but no one dares to spell out what they are. I would like to identify these two categories from the outset. If the adjectives I use rub people the wrong way, I apologize. However, someone must have the courage to say them.

There is humble conception of the role of MPs and there is an elitist conception. Those two notions are at odds when it comes to this bill. Bill C-306 is the humble vision. The government's reaction, and that of the third party, is the elitist vision. There is a very clear line and, from what I have read, it is completely unyielding. Let us not forget that sitting in a seat here in this House and representing a constituency comes with tremendous privileges. These social privileges automatically place all federal members in the now-famous 1%. While the west is going through a period of economic difficulties and uncertainties, we, as democratically elected members of Parliament, are sheltered from that wave.

I think that is the very definition of the word “privilege”. This privilege is the result of our democratic responsibilities. We work hard in return; we represent the people of a constituency and we do our best to defend their interests. Careful, I detected some rude remarks in my colleagues' comments. We do not represent the people who voted for us; we represent everyone in our riding, regardless of what party they voted for or whether they voted at all.

Those who place this democratic trust in us deserve a minimum of recognition. The seat I am sitting on is not my seat; it belongs to the people of L'Ancienne-Lorette, Loretteville and Wendake. Louis-

Private Members' Business

Saint-Laurent is not my riding, it is the riding that I represent. A majority of people in the riding of Louis-Saint-Laurent voted for me to occupy this seat on their behalf. That is my job. Their commitment to me is instrumental.

A member is first and foremost responsible to the people. I am not invincible and I remain humble before the task entrusted to me by the voters of Louis-Saint-Laurent. I admit that some very talented people elected to the House can be elected merely on the basis of their reputation. That is the ultimate accomplishment of a career in democracy. These talented people can be found in all the parties represented in the House. We all admire a number of our colleagues—often without consideration of their political persuasion.

This is not the case for everyone. Many are elected because they represent a party. That is the political party system and, although this system does have some flaws, we accepted a long time ago that it has more pluses than minuses when it comes to the democratic process. And for good reason. Some members who were recently elected because they were members of a certain party will soon prove to be incredibly talented and may perhaps be re-elected later just on their reputation.

And since I am talking about humility and great merit, I would like to point out the excellent work of the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore, who introduced this bill about 15 years ago. Fifteen years, what does that represent? It represents 15 years of inaction on something that is so simple. We in the NDP have not changed our position. We fight for the principles we believe in. Respect is the guiding principle that directs our work. We are not here for the privileges; we are here because someone must shape and build our country. This bill reiterates that power belongs to the citizens of Canada and that this power is exercised during elections in order to send representatives to Ottawa. It reiterates that the power in our system comes from the bottom and not the top. The member does not choose; citizens choose through the elected member.

This bill, which would limit the ability of elected individuals to put their own interests ahead of the voters' democratic choice, reflects the NDP's view that our democracy can be improved. How does the fact that other Commonwealth countries, such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom, do not have such laws justify abandoning this idea? Can Canada not innovate in politics? Voters find this lack of flexibility discouraging. Everyone knows that. Everyone claims to be aware of and concerned about the crisis of legitimacy we are facing.

● (1835)

Fewer and fewer Canadians bother to vote. Voters feel alienated from government. Yet nobody is doing anything. The system does not change. What is the current situation? Anemic voter turnout and pervasive cynicism. Do we have to wait until voter turnout in general elections drops below 50%, which is what happened during the last provincial election in Ontario?

The system is fundamentally exclusive. Neither the government nor the third party are truly concerned about voter turnout. That is the only explanation. This way, they win. The situation does not bother them because they have a basically elitist view of an MP's role.

Private Members' Business

I have tried to make sense of their arguments, but I can see only one troubling conclusion: voters are not relevant to the debates. The people are secondary. The member of Parliament is the only one who really matters. As I understand it, elitism is the best word to describe what is going on here. These people think that members of Parliament are an end unto themselves. An election victory is proof of intellectual greatness, confirmation of brilliance, an A+ awarded by the nation. These MPs turn up in Ottawa like little monarchs because, clearly, the people in their ridings could see that they deserved a place in the 1%. I apologize if I have offended anyone, but not talking about this would be much worse.

At first reading of this bill, some members of the House very seriously stated the following by way of criticism:

In effect, the bill would require members who fundamentally disagree with their caucus or with the leader of their party to resign their seat or to sit as independents.... Such restrictions would strengthen the control of political parties over individual members by bolstering a party's threat of expulsion in order to maintain party discipline and limit the representative role of members.

I do not want to make a value judgment, but this was said by an elected member of a resolutely strict, closed and exclusive government whose thoughts are systematically expressed as a single voice as a result of blatant internal terror. I will refrain from commenting on its legitimacy.

A floor crosser often acts to save his own skin. The wind blows in a certain direction, the person loses the favour he once had and panic pushes him a little bit left or right, depending on the case.

At first reading of Bill C-306, many members searched the long list of former floor crossers in Canadian history to find exceptional cases that would justify the act. When they failed to find any truly glorious and memorable examples, they quickly turned to world history. Perhaps because Carthaginian leader Hannibal was too obscure, they decided to mention Sir Winston Churchill, who changed political parties several times. Any reference to Sir Winston Churchill in this context is extreme. The man made a direct contribution to the survival of western civilization through the force of his character, and he received a Nobel Prize in Literature. His case is in a class of its own. Let us not compare apples and oranges.

Some members are trying to confuse voters. They want to lead voters to believe that they are acting in the interest of voters when, clearly, they are acting in their own interest. Members get used to their privileges. They start to feel invincible and they will do anything they can to stay here. After all, they got an A+, did they not?

I am confused when some hon. members refute the intention of this bill by saying that it is ineffective, since it is really the court of public opinion that judges members of Parliament. Essentially, they are saying that the system regulates itself. Is neo-liberalism being applied to the political party system?

If we follow the hon. member's reasoning to the letter, a member of Parliament is completely disconnected from his or her electors and has to defend his or her record just once every four years. It is clear what the Conservatives' priorities are. This also suggests that the message sent during the previous election is quite meaningless for the Conservatives and the Liberals. The mandate that is given to a member of Parliament under a specific banner ideally should last

until the next general election. We know that circumstances change. We know that people change their minds. However, we are not talking about whether we want rice or potatoes with our steak. We are talking about affiliation to a political party and the convictions of the voters who made their choice.

The New Democratic Party, as I was saying earlier, has strong principles. An MP is not a demigod whose opinion is worth more than that of the people who sent him or her to Ottawa. We are not talking about a mandate from heaven. Just because an MP believes that the ideology he or she once defended is no longer suitable does not mean that walking away is morally acceptable.

The MP is in Ottawa precisely because the people want him or her to be here. Leaving it up to the voters to decide in the next general election does not make crossing the floor morally acceptable. That is why we strongly believe that a member who crosses the floor, as honourable as it is, has to answer to the voters if he or she decides to change parties.

● (1840)

[English]

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Madam Speaker, I take great pride in rising to speak in favour of Bill C-306, introduced by my colleague from Pontiac.

In the last parliament, I had the privilege of introducing a similar bill due in part to the experience that I had in my own riding, Vancouver Kingsway, which I will speak about in just a few moments.

I would also like to acknowledge the hard work of the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore who has been a champion of this kind of legislation for many years in the House.

Fundamentally, the bill is about democracy. Fundamentally, the bill is about respect for voters. Fundamentally, this bill is about elections and the way Canadians choose their representatives in their parliaments and legislatures in this country. Bill C-306 proposes that byelections be called when an elected member of any political party in this House decides on their own to change to another political party than the one chosen by the voters in that member's riding during his or her term of office.

The bill proposes that byelections also be called when an independent member decides to join a political party during his or her term in office if he or she were elected as an independent. However, byelections are not called, according to this legislation, when an elected member of a political party decides to become an independent during his or her term in office. This exception is important because it allows a member of Parliament to make a principled stand against his or her party if they deem it appropriate, but removes the incentive to do so for personal gain or in violation of the clear expression of the voters of the riding.

What is floor crossing? It is essentially a betrayal of the trust that electors put in us when they send us to Ottawa. When candidates run under the banner of a party, they are saying that they agree broadly with the principles and leadership of that party. To expand on that, the reality of elections in Canada is this.

Private Members' Business

We have 100,000 to 150,000 voters in many of our ridings. We do not get to meet all of those voters. It is impossible for voters to come to independently interview each candidate running for office. Therefore, our country and modern democracies around the world have developed a party structure, allowing people to gather together and ascribe to broad and general concepts, philosophies and principles and to present that grouping of policies and principles to the public. Why is that important? It is important because that is how voters express their democratic will. They do not have to independently interview each candidate. They know that when someone is running as a Conservative, a Liberal or a New Democrat, they can trust that those candidates broadly represent a set of principles, policies and philosophies reflecting that voter's intention.

I have heard some highfalutin stuff in the House from the third party in particular that I think is utter nonsense.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: That's what we think of what you're saying.

Mr. Don Davies: It suggests that people do not vote for the parties in this country—

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: People vote for people too, you know.

Mr. Don Davies: Madam Speaker, can I have some quiet, please, from the hon. member behind me? I listened carefully when he was talking. The member should respect democracy. I have the floor.

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Indeed, the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway will continue.

Mr. Don Davies: Madam Speaker, it is hard to concentrate when I have a yapper two desks behind me who wanted everyone to be silent in this House.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Madam Speaker, on a point of order, all members are honourable members in the chamber. Sometimes when we get emotional in a speech, as the member is starting to do in his speech, someone will heckle, even within our own political parties. It was nothing that was meant to be disruptive. As to whether or not it is unparliamentary, it is the manner in which one puts it.

The member was expressing himself passionately on an issue. Yes, I did say one or two words. They were not meant to be rude. I apologize if the member felt that it was not appropriate for me to have said so.

Having said that, I do not believe it was appropriate for him to take his cheap shots either.

• (1845)

The Deputy Speaker: I think the member has apologized and we will move on. I would ask the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway to continue. I hope all members will try to maintain decorum while another member is speaking in the House.

Mr. Don Davies: Madam Speaker, when electors vote for a particular party, a particular candidate, they need to have confidence that the person will faithfully represent and reflect those policies and principles in the House of Commons. I would argue that members in the House who pretend that the voters of their riding are voting for them personally and not also heavily influenced by the party, policies, principles and philosophies represented by their party are seriously mistaken.

It is a promise that candidates make to their constituents that they will faithfully represent the platform they are running on, the party platform. It is in that way that the electors' votes can faithfully be counted in a Canadian election and we can call ourselves a democracy.

If people can represent themselves to be one party and then come to the House of Commons and switch to a different party, how can that be a faithful representation of the voters of our country? It cannot.

The history of floor crossing has been talked about in many speeches in the House. Historically, members who have crossed the floor have, in some cases, done so on a position of principle but most have not done so for any high-minded policy reasons or because of the interests of their constituents. Historically, this has been done for personal gain.

A few recent examples come to mind: Belinda Stronach, who moved from opposition to a cabinet post in the Liberal government; David Emerson, from my riding of Vancouver Kingsway, who moved from the Liberal opposition bench to a cabinet position in a Conservative government.

Mr. Jack Harris: How many days after he was elected.

Mr. Don Davies: He did that 14 days after the voters sent him to this House as a Liberal. Other examples include Garth Turner, Wajid Khan and Blair Wilson.

I want to talk about Vancouver Kingsway because I know the story very personally. In 2006, when the Conservative Party first got a minority government, my own member of Parliament, David Emerson, who had been a Liberal cabinet minister, crossed the floor two weeks after the election to become a Conservative cabinet minister. The people of Vancouver Kingsway felt outraged and betrayed by that decision. That betrayal was most deeply felt by the many voters who voted for a Liberal member of Parliament. Moreover, the party that came in second in that election was my own, the New Democratic Party of Canada.

I want to go over some of the numbers in that election. The Liberals in that election had 20,000 votes, the NDP had 15,500 votes and the Conservatives had 8,600 votes. We had 35,500 people who voted for a party other than the Conservatives against 8,600 who voted for the Conservatives.

Not only did the Conservative Party come third in that election, it came far back. The two parties combined, other than the Conservatives, had 400% more votes than the Conservatives and yet the people of Vancouver Kingsway found themselves represented by a Conservative member of Parliament in a Conservative cabinet for his term of office.

That is fundamentally undemocratic and a betrayal of the voters of Vancouver Kingsway, and that is exactly what the people of Vancouver Kingsway declared to this country.

Private Members' Business

Interestingly, on election night, Mr. Emerson celebrated his victory for the Liberals by declaring publicly on television that he would be the Prime Minister's worst nightmare. Two weeks later, on February 6, he was that same Prime Minister's minister of international trade. Who would stand in the House and justify such a fundamental betrayal of the democratic process? That is just absolutely awful.

The people of Vancouver Kingsway rose up in disgust. Signs sprung up all over Vancouver Kingsway. People like Mike Watson, the president of the local Conservative Riding Association, a man of rare integrity and principle, people like Jurgen Claudepierre, a lifelong Liberal supporter, and Shannon Steele, the New Democrat, worked together from all three sides of the political spectrum to oppose that fundamental rejection of the will of the people of Vancouver Kingsway.

For a democracy to work, people need to have trust in their politicians and trust is at an all time low in this country. People are not voting in elections. Why? It is because they do not trust politicians to keep their word.

• (1850)

There is no more fundamental breach of trust of politicians in this country than to ask for someone's trust and vote to represent their philosophy in the House of Commons and then get into the House and change. The recent example of the member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain crossing the floor is outrageous. The numbers are staggering. The Liberals had 12% in that riding and the member thinks it is a fair representation of constituents' vote to cross the floor to the Liberal Party. That is fundamentally wrong and should not be defended by anybody. This legislation should be put into practice to bring democracy to this country.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would first like to echo what my hon. colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent said, that is, it is an honour to be able to speak to this bill, knowing—

The Deputy Speaker: Order. I would ask for some order in the House while the member is speaking.

The hon. member for Chambly—Borduas.

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Madam Speaker, as I was saying, I wish to echo the sentiments of my colleague from Louis-Saint-Laurent. She said it was an honour to speak to this bill, knowing that over the past few months, those of us who are new here have had the opportunity to understand the honour and the significance of such a responsibility. I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. member for Pontiac on the work he has done on this file and his bill. I would also like to congratulate the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore who carried this torch for many years.

I would like to come back to the comments made earlier by one of my colleagues from the other opposition party. He said that this would jeopardize members' ability to follow their conscience and to speak out when their party heads in a direction that goes against the wishes of their constituents.

When considering such a comment, it is important to remember one nuance in the bill. After deciding to leave a political party, a member may sit as an independent. That is very important because sitting as an independent provides an opportunity to say that the choices made by his or her political party no longer correspond to the choices of the electorate. The member would not have to join a party with ideas that are contrary to those of his or her voters.

There are a number of examples. Some of our provincial colleagues, in Quebec for example, acted this way. Without commenting on debates that are not within our purview, the fact remains that, in their case, they said they left their party because they believed it was no longer the party their voters voted for.

It is understandable that by joining another party they give the opposite impression. Recent events are a perfect example. There was a glaring example this evening, during a vote on a bill. Bill C-25 deals extensively with retirement and pensions. One of our colleagues has left one party and joined another, and she voted against the NDP. I have a great deal of difficulty believing that the voters of Saint-Maurice—Champlain would have agreed with her decision, in light of the fact that they chose a certain political platform on May 2.

Choosing a political platform is very important. I will again reiterate the comments of the member for Louis-Saint-Laurent. All members work very hard to represent the voters in their ridings as best they can. In spite of the individual work of a member, he or she cannot be everywhere at the same time. That is when a party's platform is very important. When people choose a political party, it obviously plays an important role because the name of the political party is on the ballot. The most hard-working member must have people in the riding who will identify with the name of the political party that appears beside their name on the ballot. Every member works to transcend the existence of his or her party. The member must do such a good job that we forget their political affiliation and we really think about what they do. We are at least associated with this work.

I can speak from personal experience and I am certain that many of my colleagues would agree with me. When a person decides to enter politics and to represent a political party, he is very aware of the principles of that party, as are the voters. That is probably the reason—at least I hope it is—that the person chose to become involved in that particular party in the first place. I find it very hard to believe that someone would be prepared to put his name on a ballot and, if he wins the election, fulfill the responsibilities of a member of Parliament for a political party whose values do not completely correspond to his own.

Private Members' Business

●(1855)

I find it very hard to understand that situation. I would also like to come back to an example given by the hon. member for Vancouver Kingsway—the case of David Emerson. At that time, I was in the middle of my political science degree. When this event occurred, I was sitting in a class of political science students. These are informed people who understand our country's parliamentary system and electoral realities. No one in the room was prepared to say that he made the right decision and no one could begin to understand why a member of Parliament was prepared to go against the wishes and will of the voters so soon after an election—whether it be two weeks, as in 2006, or seven months, as was the case recently.

I have a personal example to illustrate this point. One morning in my riding, Chambly—Borduas, I was having coffee with a resident of Saint-Basile-le-Grand, where I live. She made a very interesting comment about the work of my predecessor, whom I respect very much. She said that, despite the fact that he had done so much for our region and our riding, it was time for change; there were things that needed changing. Among other things, she mentioned my predecessor's stance on various issues as a member of a particular political party with particular ideas. In the end, she said that she had nothing against the person in question, who was a hard-working guy like the other MPs here, but that he was bound by certain ideas and had to make decisions based on his political party.

One could easily argue that if ever that MP had stopped believing in those ideas, he could have switched parties. That may be true, but the fact remains, as I said at the outset, that he was elected under a banner, and the fact that he could choose to join a party whose ideas stood in stark opposition to the platform on which he was elected is utterly incomprehensible. Just consider some of the examples given. I gave one recently. Take Mr. Emerson and Ms. Stronach. I would bet that no Liberal or Conservative would be prepared to say that they have anything in common. Yet individuals elected as members of one political party were prepared to switch to another. Would my colleagues say that their ideas are similar? Not at all. People in the ridings voted for certain ideas, which the MP no longer espouses. I think that is what we have to keep in mind as we talk about this bill.

The other important element of this bill is the notion of respect for the electorate. If we look at what happened in 2006 or even more recently, the concerns of Canadians are clear. People made it very clear that they wanted byelections. Thus, we must bear something in mind when making a decision: the people's wishes. We must respect those wishes. And if a member makes a decision knowing that it is in the best interests of his or her constituency, riding or region, I have no problem with that person running in a byelection. If his or her convictions are right, I am 110% convinced that the people would share those convictions. And this would show in the results of the byelection. Being in politics takes courage—the courage to be accountable for what we say and do, especially what we do. This is what would happen if that individual were to run in a byelection. If that person had made the right choice, as I said, the result would reflect the people's wishes. I think that is the basic idea of this bill.

That is why I invite all members of the House, with their parties' convictions and those of the people they represent, to support this bill.

●(1900)

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased to speak to Bill C-306, An Act to amend the Parliament of Canada Act (political affiliation). Like my colleagues who spoke before me, I would like to congratulate the member for Pontiac for his initiative. I would also like to congratulate the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore for his excellent work; he has been working on this since 1999. In fact, since 1999, the NDP has asked that members who cross the floor during their term of office go before the voters to ratify their decision. We believe that this is fair and democratic, contrary to what members of the third party, for example, might say.

It is important that we mention it. This bill makes a lot of sense in terms of democracy because the general election campaign is always the moment when voters—every four or five years, or more often in recent years—have the opportunity to mark an X beside the name of the person who will represent them for those four or five years. In theory, parliamentary tradition says that the voter votes for the local candidate. That is just a theory. In reality, and I believe that we would all agree, people vote for many reasons. Some vote for the local candidate and others for the leader of a party or for a political party and its platform.

The most recent case is that of the hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain who, less than eight months after the election, decided to switch parties. This case clearly showed that people are against this type of political shift. Immediately afterward, a poll was conducted by Leger Marketing in Quebec with more than 1,000 respondents. People who responded truly represented popular opinion. And yes, the poll was taken after the deed was done and reactions were heated. I can say that the opinion is the same when a public opinion poll is taken before or after a similar event.

The poll indicated that 60% of the respondents felt that members of Parliament who were elected for a party should not change political affiliation. Only 32%, or less than a third of the respondents agreed with the principle, but 60% were against it. Nevertheless, since our parliamentary system currently allows it, respondents were asked whether a member of Parliament in this case should have their decision confirmed through a byelection and 70% of the people agreed. Only 22% said it was not necessary. The public wants this type of change and the latest incident clearly shows there is a public consensus in favour of an initiative like the one being proposed in Bill C-306.

Private Members' Business

I mentioned that people vote for a multitude of reasons and the hon. member for Winnipeg North said that people were voting for Jack Layton in the case of the hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain. That is true, just as they voted for the NDP and its policies, just as they might have voted for the local candidate. This was my fourth election campaign and I know that many people in Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques voted for me. I also know that if I had run as an independent, I would not have won this election.

If the hon. member for Winnipeg North, among others, who made all those comments during the earlier presentation by my colleague, is truly convinced that people only vote for the local candidate, as he suggested in his presentation, I challenge him to run as an independent in the next election and see what happens. He will not do it because running with a political party, benefiting from the resources available during an election campaign and an electoral platform that he promotes along with himself, is what got him elected, just as I was able to get elected for the same reasons.

To say that, in theory, people vote for the local candidate and that is how we should look at this, is incorrect. In practice, people clearly think differently.

● (1905)

It is important to understand that people vote only every four or five years and that they vote for all those reasons. If a member of Parliament changes parties, the people who voted for all those reasons feel betrayed, and for good reason. That is what happened in the riding of Saint-Maurice—Champlain, and that is what happened in the riding of Newmarket—Aurora, for example, when Belinda Stronach changed parties. That is also what happened in the riding of Vancouver Kingsway. Voters feel betrayed because they feel cheated out of their choice, particularly those who vote for the political party, the party leader or the platform. Many people do it. The Leger Marketing poll that I just cited also asked people what motivates them to vote for a certain person during an election.

According to the poll, close to 30% of people vote for a political party; 30% vote for the party platform; between 20% and 25% vote for the party leader; and only 12% vote for the strength or character of the riding candidate. During a general election, people vote a certain way for many reasons, and when a person who became a member of Parliament for reasons other than his own candidacy changes parties in the middle of his term, the people who voted for him feel cheated.

We also need to consider the absurdity of our system of electoral politics. The Canada Elections Act prohibits voters from selling their vote. It is completely prohibited, and fairly severe sanctions are imposed on anyone who decides to sell his vote or who receives undue benefits as a result of the way he votes. However, no such sanctions exist for a member of Parliament who decides to sell his seat. Examples of people who sold their seats have been mentioned. For example, there is the case of Newmarket—Aurora, where Belinda Stronach left the Conservatives to join the Liberal government in exchange for a cabinet position. In Vancouver Kingsway, David Emerson did the opposite when he left the Liberals to join the Conservatives in exchange for a cabinet post.

Are we supposed to believe that these individuals would have deserted even if the party in power had not offered such perks? Of course not. MPs can personally sell the value of their seats and receive undue benefits as a result of the position the voters gave them. Such MPs did not necessarily get the job on their own merits, but because of a variety of factors. That is the problem Bill C-306 would fix. That is what the NDP has been trying to fix since 1999.

We keep hearing about participatory democracy. Supposedly, that is how our voters want us to vote. It is difficult for each of us to talk to all of our voters. There are 85,000 voters in my riding. I have not yet met all of them. I hope I will have a chance to meet them all in the next four years, but that is a lot of people, and I feel for the MPs who represent more than 100,000 voters.

But in this case, this is a private member's bill. Every member should be able to vote in accordance with his or her conscience. But I can guarantee that if every one of us went back to our ridings to consult the people about whether the voters should have a say in this decision, which is supposed to be made by one person, the MP, the vast majority would be in favour of the MP's decision. This is important.

I see that there are very few government members here just now, and I see one member from the third party. I think that goes a long way toward explaining the problem. We have to consider a particular situation, one that arouses voter cynicism. Once again, in his presentation, the member for Winnipeg North said that we have to tackle the situation. Fine, yes, we have to deal with it. This is our chance to do that, to tackle one cause of voter cynicism. If we were to ask the people of Saint-Maurice—Champlain, they would say that recent events have made them cynical when it comes to politics.

That is why I urge members to do their job, to consult their constituents, to find out exactly what they think of this private member's bill. I would also invite them to vote according to this decision, because it is a decision that concerns them, concerns their right to vote and the value of the decision they make during the election campaign.

● (1910)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Alfred-Pellan. I must inform the member that she has only about three minutes, because the hon. member for Pontiac must have time to reply.

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Madam Speaker, I will try to be brief. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to Bill C-306, introduced by my hon. colleague from Pontiac, which has to do with respecting voters' choices when it comes to political affiliation. I am delighted to debate this here in the House. I have been talking about this with my constituents for several weeks now. Many things have happened, at both the provincial and federal levels. Quebec has seen many political floor crossings in the past few weeks.

I have been asked many questions on the matter. People were very worried. They wanted to know what became of their choice, why members were not respecting democracy and why they were betraying the people who had elected them. Many of my colleagues talked about this here today. A few comments struck me as particularly interesting, especially comments about those who criticize the NDP's bill.

We have heard a great deal about the fact that, in Canada, we vote for an individual. That is true. Our political system means that, in an election, we vote for the next person to represent us. But if we ask our voters, most of them do not necessarily vote for the person, but rather for ideas, a party, a platform. My colleague from Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques just said that only 12% of voters vote for the individual, and not for all the other reasons that influence how people vote. Unfortunately, I find this argument a little weak. It is sad to think our electorate is being disrespected in that regard.

Someone also talked about a member's freedom of expression. I would be very careful addressing that point. Do members not have a moral obligation towards the people who elected them? When one changes parties, there is a breach of trust. My hon. colleague from Pontiac is suggesting that when members no longer agree with the ideas of their party, they can sit as independents. If they definitely want to join another party, a byelection must be held. This shows basic respect for the people's freedom of expression. Besides, members are not above the rights of others. They must respect the rights of their constituents.

● (1915)

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to thank the hon. members for their enlightened speeches. I want to again congratulate the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore for the work he has done for so many years on this bill.

During the last election, Canadians voted to put an end to the old ways of doing politics in Canada and to change things in Ottawa.

For the past few weeks we have been hearing about politicians who change parties, provincially and federally, as though you can change political values the way you change your shirt.

This bill is reasonable and simply provides that a member's seat will be vacated and a byelection called for that seat only if the member changes parties or if an independent MP becomes a member of a party, as the case may be. It is a matter of respecting the voice of the people. A member's seat will not be considered vacated if the member elected as a member of a political party chooses to sit as an independent. This is a simple and reasonable proposal to protect our democracy.

In the recent case of the hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain, who was elected under the NDP banner and then, seven months later, turned around and joined the Liberals, the Liberals should also be ashamed for once again playing old political games. If my bill were to pass, and I truly hope it does, the voters of Maurice would not feel today that they had been taken for a ride. They would not be so angry with politicians in general. The hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain would have had to run as a Liberal and ask the people to re-elect her.

Private Members' Business

We know that people are increasingly disenchanted with politics. The three themes that people keep bringing up are members' honesty, their accountability and the waste of public funds. A growing percentage of the population thinks that politicians are lying to them, lack integrity and are wasting their money.

We can indeed talk about the growing political cynicism in Canada over the past 30 years. Since 1982, the honesty and integrity of MPs were considered to be low or very low and 10 years later, the percentage was barely 49%.

According to an article that appeared in *La Presse* in May 2010, in Quebec, the province where my riding is located:

The results of this survey...indicate that 87% of respondents choose adjectives such as "discouraged" or "disheartened" to describe how they feel about politics. One in five voters...is indifferent. Only 9% said they were "optimistic" and 11% were "passionate".

Whose fault is that? Ours. We wonder why they are so disenchanted. The main reason is politicians' lack of integrity.

This makes me sad because I decided to get into politics and to become more involved in my community in order to help people fight for their causes. And I know very well that the people in the riding of Pontiac voted for me because they have confidence in my party's ideas. It is unfortunate that, in recent years, according to a number of polls on trust in various professions, politicians are always ranked at the bottom, in Quebec and in Canada. The floor crossings in recent months have only fanned the fire.

The results of a poll on the Democratize.ca site, show that, in the last two months, 80% support my Bill C-306 on political affiliation.

Therefore, I invite all Canadians to speak out about this and write to their MPs because the more Canadians who express their dissatisfaction, the better the chance that the government will vote for this bill.

We should remember that our ridings do not belong to us. They belong to the voters. The NDP has been clear: if members wish to cross the floor, they should first ask the voters. My bill to respect the voters' choice would make this mandatory.

● (1920)

Voters who have placed their trust in us deserve nothing less. This seat is not just an object: it represents the people of the riding of Pontiac in the House of Commons. It does not belong to us, the MPs, but to the people of the Pontiac and to our voters.

Let us honour our voters and respect our commitments.

The Deputy Speaker: It being 7:20 p.m., the time provided for debate has expired.

The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Deputy Speaker: All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Adjournment Proceedings

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Deputy Speaker: All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Deputy Speaker: In my opinion, the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Pursuant to Standing Order 93, the division stands deferred until Wednesday, February 8, 2012, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Madam Speaker, in November in question period I asked the Minister of the Environment this question. Who exactly does he work for? On this side of the House, we are working for Canadians, but on that side of the House I am afraid it seems they are working for the oil and gas industry.

The Minister of the Environment is failing to protect the environment and failing to take action for the environment. I can spell out why I believe this.

First, the government has absolutely failed to introduce any regulations about greenhouse gas emissions and the oil sands. These were promised to us back in 2009. The then minister of the environment said that they were coming, and we waited. At the end of last year, we were told not to worry because the regulations were coming, and we waited. Only months after that did the minister contradict himself by revealing that these regulations had stalled. It is 2012 and we still have no action on greenhouse gas emissions from the oil industry and the oil sands.

Conservatives disappointed Canadians from coast to coast to coast and our international partners when the Minister of the Environment announced that Canada was withdrawing from the Kyoto protocol.

Canada is the largest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases in the world. We do have a target, as I am sure we will hear in a moment, but the target is very weak. It is a 17% reduction in greenhouse gases by 2020. Data shows that under the Conservative government our greenhouse gas emissions have risen 7% since it took office.

What the Conservatives do not seem to understand is the fact that withdrawing from Kyoto is not only putting the health of our environment at risk, but it is putting the health of our economy at risk. It is estimated that climate change will have impacts of \$5 billion annually by 2020. This is obviously going to significantly impact our economy, not to mention our national security.

Now the Minister of Natural Resources has launched an attack against all Canadians, including first nations communities. I believe all Canadians respect the environment and want it protected. He has gone on the offensive, labelling them adversaries and radicals. The Conservatives are taking aim at thousands of Canadians who want to see us as a country uphold our international commitments and take action on the environment.

Government inaction on the renewable energy file also means that we are falling further behind. This is an opportunity for us to create growth in our economy and to develop incredible jobs in the renewable energy sector. Conservative inaction on climate means that we are falling behind, and the rest of the world knows this. Other countries are taking action and yet we are not. Instead, we have massive corporate welfare subsidies to the oil and gas industry instead of taking aim at the green economy of the future.

When will the minister start respecting the future generations of Canada that will have to clean up after his failed policies and broken promises? When will he actually start doing the job that Canadians expect him to do, and that is to start listening to Canadians and take concrete steps to protect our environment and our future?

● (1925)

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Madam Speaker, let us be honest. The member opposite wants to talk about jobs and when the NDP members start talking about Canadian jobs, they are actually speaking about the destruction of them. When they stand and speak it is about destroying hundreds of thousands of jobs. I am going to talk about that.

As I said on November 18, we believe we can move ahead with the proper environmental protections and the proper economic development. We are going to continue to do that for Canadians. We are going to continue to provide them with more jobs and more opportunities. We are going to do that with a balance, and we certainly do not find a balance on the other side of the House. Trying to find a job-creating project that the NDP actually supports is like trying to find a needle in a haystack.

Does the NDP support oil jobs? Absolutely not. Every time the member opposite stands in this House it is to speak against the economic opportunities that are creating hundreds of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in economic growth across this country. On Keystone XL, her party decided her opposition was not good enough to keep it in Canada, it sent her to our largest trading partner, the United States, and told it to reject a project that would create 140,000 jobs for Canadians. That is shameful.

It does not stop there. Whether it is the northern gateway, the Trans Mountain pipeline, Joslyn mine, or any other project that would provide jobs in our energy sector, the NDP and the member opposite firmly stand against Canadian job creators. It does not just stop at our oil sector. Shale gas, definitely not. Jobs in the nuclear sector, definitely not. In its submission to the Greenpeace election 2008 questionnaire, the NDP said, “Canada’s New Democrats do not support nuclear energy. Nuclear energy is dangerous, prohibitively expensive and far from a solution to climate change”. That is another extreme position. That is 30,000 jobs across Canada which the NDP is saying no to.

Surely the NDP could at least support the forestry sector. Shockingly no, it cannot even do that. Let us listen to the NDP member for Winnipeg Centre who said at committee that we should not “be talking about a better way to cut down more trees and build with materials that begin to rot the moment you use it. We should be talking about ways to build without” wood.

While the NDP takes the puzzling position of supporting job creation by opposing all job-creating projects in our natural resources sector, our government has taken a different approach. We understand Canada is blessed with an abundance of natural resources that provide hundreds of thousands of jobs across this country and provide billions in economic growth. Over the next 10 years, there is \$500 billion in potential investment in our natural resources sector. Gaining this investment is not guaranteed. It is not a foregone conclusion that requires us to sit back and watch it happen. We are fighting with countries around the world for this investment and the jobs that come with it. We must act to create the conditions necessary to put Canada’s economy and environment on a firm footing going forward.

While the member and her party opposite continue to stand in the way of job growth in this country, our government will not apologize for doing what is necessary to put Canadians to work in good high-paying jobs.

● (1930)

Ms. Megan Leslie: Madam Speaker, I will tell the member what jobs I support. I support jobs in the manufacturing sector that the Conservatives are killing by allowing unchecked, unbridled growth in the oil sands. I support jobs in the green economy of the future, a future that the Conservatives are killing by remaining in the 19th century and failing to think about this century and the next century.

I also support jobs in energy efficiency like, for example, the eco-energy home retrofit program that saw jobs created in each and every community across Canada. These are not jobs that can be shipped offshore. These are not temporary construction jobs for a pipeline that we are going to have to live with the environmental impacts of down the road. These are good-paying jobs in all our communities. What happened this week? The minister announced that the Conservatives are cutting the program when it worked and it created jobs.

When will the minister and the parliamentary secretary understand that jobs and the environment go hand in hand?

Mr. David Anderson: Madam Speaker, we understand that full well. That is why we have a balanced position. The natural resources sector is poised to lead Canada in growth.

Adjournment Proceedings

In this country there is a group that wants to stop all development of our hydrocarbons. There is a group that wants to destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs across this country for ideological reasons. There is a group that wants to destroy billions of dollars of economic development. Do members know who that group is? It is the NDP, the official opposition. Is there an economic development project in this country that it supports?

The member opposite suggests that manufacturing jobs are being destroyed by the development of the oil sands. She does not know what she is talking about. Maybe the NDP will turn its back on Canadian workers. Our government will not do that. We will stand with Canadian workers. We will develop the natural resource economy, and at the same time we will protect our environment.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, on December 12, 2011 I posed 11 questions to the parliamentary secretary regarding ozone monitoring, as Canada has a critical role to play in the world as part of the global observing system for climate in support of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The questions were as follows.

Why have both the minister and the parliamentary secretary repeatedly stonewalled and said there will be no cuts to ozone monitoring, especially when their own briefing document is entitled, “Ozone Monitoring Cuts”?

Will monitoring be maintained in the lower atmosphere?

Before a decision was taken to cut the ozone monitoring program, was any research undertaken to assess the adequacy of Canadian contributions to the global observing system for climate in support of the UNFCCC, yes or no?

Was Environment Canada aware of the two million square kilometre ozone hole over the Arctic when decisions were made to cut ozone monitoring?

How many people work in the World Ozone and Ultraviolet Radiation Data Centre?

Does the parliamentary secretary understand that if the person who runs the data centre is let go, the data centre will close?

By what percentage, in terms of money and positions, was the experimental studies division to be cut?

What percentage has been cut?

Can the parliamentary secretary table in the House a spreadsheet showing how many people work in the department, how many people received letters and who, if any, had their letters rescinded?

In response to my first nine questions, the parliamentary secretary said:

—as I have said several times before in response to my colleague’s questions, we will continue to monitor the ozone. It is as simple as that.

Adjournment Proceedings

It is, in fact, not so simple. This is about an issue that is critical to life on earth and enormously complicated. Ozone protects us from harmful ultraviolet or UV radiation from the sun, the radiation that causes skin cancer, cataracts, sunburns and local and whole-body immunosuppression. Without the ozone layer, life as we know it would not exist on earth.

Canadians deserve better than “It is as simple as that”. They deserve real answers to important questions. More important, if the parliamentary secretary is as committed to monitoring ozone as she says, then why has nothing been done to reverse the cuts to ozone science? Cuts reduce Canada's ability to monitor the environment and respond to problems, reduce our country's ability to explore the links between ozone and climate change and threaten international science and Canada's reputation. Is the government trying to eliminate science that it finds inconvenient?

My 10th and 11th questions were as follows: Do brewers and ozonesondes perform the same task; that is, is there duplication in the system, yes or no?

Why in May were ozonesondes critical and in fact believed to be in need of being expanded and not so in August? What changed?

Eleven questions, zero answers, zero accountability, zero respect for taxpayers despite the government's claim that it has a responsibility to manage and be wise stewards of taxpayers' dollars and to deliver services that are important. Canadians deserve better than “It is as simple as that”. They have a right to know the details, and every time the parliamentary secretary avoids providing the details, she fails to fulfill her responsibilities to the people of Canada.

•(1935)

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is great to be back in the House in adjournment proceedings talking to my colleague opposite about ozone monitoring.

We will continue to monitor the ozone, and because we were so committed to providing that answer again to my colleague opposite, she had the opportunity to talk to Dr. Karen Dodds, the assistant deputy minister of the science and technology branch within the Department of the Environment, at the environment committee before the Christmas break. The committee heard a large amount of testimony in answer to the questions of my colleague opposite. To reassure her beyond a shadow of a doubt and to re-emphasize the answer we keep giving in the House, the World Ozone and Ultraviolet Data Centre will continue to deliver its world-class services and core services will not be compromised.

There seems to be a bit of confusion here tonight on the part of my colleague opposite about the answer to those questions, so I am going to repeat what Dr. Dodds said in committee in response to the following question by my colleague opposite:

Why have the parliamentary secretary and the minister repeatedly said that there would be no cuts? Who is right?

Dr. Dodds responded:

There are no reductions to the monitoring—to the results—that Environment Canada needs to provide to meet our obligations to Canadians.

How we provide those results is something that we're having discussions inside about how best to use the dollars we have available to us.

This is about getting great science and great results for Canadians and being wise stewards of taxpayers' dollars. This testimony clearly shows that we are committed.

To some of the other questions of my colleague opposite, I will give a few select answers. Will monitoring be maintained in the lower atmosphere, yes or no? Dr. Dodds said yes.

In the interest of my colleague tonight, I would encourage her to read through that transcript because many of those questions were answered. To re-emphasize one more time for the House, we will continue to monitor the ozone.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Madam Speaker, Dr. Dodds did come on December 13. She appeared before the environment and sustainable development committee and committed to continuing the ozonesonde programs at three Arctic stations: Alert, Eureka and Resolute. I would like to congratulate the government for at last seeing some light.

However, there is no commitment to the southern ozone stations that are needed to keep pollution forecasts on track. The government still does not seem to understand that ozone pollution and the ozone layer are two different things.

The reality is that Canada is one of the largest countries in the world and we do not even have one ozonesonde per province. There are no ozonesonde launches in New Brunswick, Quebec or P.E.I. The European ozonesonde network is denser and they launch every three days for pollution forecasts. Canada really is headed in the wrong direction under the Conservative government.

I would point out that this speech was based on that testimony and most of those questions remain unanswered.

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Madam Speaker, I will re-emphasize the answer that Dr. Dodds gave to our committee. There are no reductions to the monitoring, to the results that Environment Canada needs to provide to meet our obligations to Canadians.

Again, this is one more clear example, beyond myself and the minister saying this repeatedly in the House of Commons, that Environment Canada will continue to monitor ozone in this country.

•(1940)

SERVICE CANADA

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I stand this evening to further try to find some rhyme or reason with regard to the situation the government has created with the closure of EI processing centres. We know that 600 employees are going home over the next number of months because of the cutbacks in that particular department.

Adjournment Proceedings

The unfortunate part is that under the Conservative government we know that more and more Canadians are finding themselves unemployed. We know there is duress, strain and stress that is created with being out of work. It is truly an unfortunate situation. However, when people file an EI claim, the stress is increased as some people are waiting six, seven, sometimes eight weeks. My office has dealt with cases where people have gone eight weeks without any income. These people are waiting to fill their fridge, fill prescriptions, fill their oil tank, whatever it might be, but they are without income. It puts a further stress on the family unit, which is truly unfortunate.

Hopefully I will get some kind of direction from the parliamentary secretary, the designated hitter today.

The fact is that the minister did not understand or recognize the extent of the problem. As a matter of fact, she dismissed the problem in a letter to the Charlottetown *Guardian* in saying that cheques were being sent out within 23 days. We know that is not a fact. We know that is not true.

A notification of processing goes out and that is received within 28 days. Within that period, some people receive a cheque. The ones that flow through the system with no problem get a cheque within 28 days, and that does happen. However, if there is the least thing, such as a hyphenated name with the hyphen left out, or the wrong postal code, or the record of employment does not match up with the application, or anything that might be outside the norm the least little bit, that application is spit out and it could be five, six, seven or eight weeks before the person receives any kind of income. That is a hardship for the most vulnerable.

The minister, before she even tries to attempt to fix it, has to realize that there is a problem. However, she does not realize there is a problem because she does not understand the process. When she appeared at committee and we pushed her on this particular point, it was a revelation. As a matter of fact, she could not answer the question. The deputy minister had to come in and explain the situation to her.

How can we address a problem if a minister does not understand the responsibilities within his or her portfolio? It is shameful and Canadians are being hurt.

Does the minister understand now that people are not being paid within 28 days? There is a notification, some are getting cheques, but a great number are being vetted out of that process and are not receiving cheques. They are getting notification of non-payment. Does the minister understand that now?

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is a great pleasure to address my colleague opposite for, I think, the first time in the House tonight. My colleague spoke about understanding priorities and I am glad he raised that because I am not quite clear on what the Liberal Party understands as priorities.

Our government understands that creating jobs and economic growth and also helping Canadians during their times of need is core to government. That is why we have undertaken numerous measures over the last six years to see that through, measures which my colleagues opposite have opposed several times.

I just want to remind my colleague opposite of some of the positive things that we are doing to help Canadians. First, even though there is a global economic downturn, we have created over 600,000 net new jobs, which is a positive statistic and a positive thing for Canadians.

With regard to some of the other things my colleague has said, we provided 2.6 million self-employed Canadians with access to special EI benefits on a voluntary basis. We improved the work sharing program. We capped EI premiums for 2011. We introduced the wage earner protection program. Those are all tangible measures to help Canadians in times of need because we understand that, yes, there is definitely fragility in our economy right now and we need to help people when they are out of work.

However, we also need to talk about ensuring that we have a service provision. Canadians have given our government a very clear mandate to eliminate the deficit and return to balanced budgets while making our services more effective and efficient. That is what we are trying to do here. We have established a service improvement agenda with short and long-term objectives and we are taking action to ensure that those Canadians in need of EI receive these benefits in a timely manner.

Automation is an important element of our EI service modernization effort. Why is that? Its aim is to alleviate the cumbersome paper based processes and get benefits to eligible people faster no matter where they live, exactly what my colleague opposite is talking about. To get benefits to eligible people is part of this process.

This year, as with other years, we added resources in anticipation of the peak period in December and January. In fact, over the last number of weeks, we have added about 400 employees to our processing efforts and shifted 120 staff from part-time to full-time, as well as substantively increasing our use of overtime. This is to get benefits out to Canadians in need.

Contrary to the claims of my colleague opposite, we are working hard to serve Canadians' needs and ensure that our system is modern and effective well into the future. We are also taking steps to reassign staff from non-core functions within Service Canada to get them out on those front lines to assist with claims processing during peak needs.

In the long run, and this is important, we are confident that we can improve service to Canadians through our three-year modernization initiative.

In summary, we are working hard and we are working hard on behalf of Canadians to improve the services we deliver.

● (1945)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Madam Speaker, as eloquent as my colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, might be reading the department's speech, I doubt that she has convinced one other member of this chamber tonight that the job is being done in the processing centres right now. I guess it is noble to try to move toward automation but when automation is not getting it done, Canadians are still being hurt.

Adjournment Proceedings

When we see centres being shut down in Gander, Newfoundland where the unemployment rate is 18.5%, and when we see centres being shut down in Glace Bay and Sydney where the unemployment rate is about 16.5%, but we see centres being kept open and the work being moved to Halifax where it is about 7% unemployment, and to Edmonton where it is about 6.5% unemployment, and the turnover rate there is far greater, the retention rate is much higher in smaller communities, does she see a misguided approach to the movement of this work to those centres?

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Madam Speaker, as we announced last August and as the minister has talked about in the House, we are gradually reducing the current 120 smaller and more costly EI processing sites to 22 larger, more efficient regional processing sites because we want to improve service. This is also why we are undertaking the automation exercise.

Just to re-emphasize, this is because current paper based processes are cumbersome. Our government is recognizing and taking the leadership we need to improve those services over time. How are we ensuring that we still deliver services while this process is undertaken? We are increasing staff and transitioning staff from part-time to full-time. We are using overtime. We are committed to serving people with regard to EI benefits. We have plans to keep that going in the future. This is something that is a core service provision that is very important to this government.

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: 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 7:50 p.m.)

CONTENTS

Wednesday, February 1, 2012

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Outma Sqilx'w Cultural School			
Mr. Albas.....	4699	Ms. Finley.....	4703
The Environment		Mr. Rae.....	4703
Mr. Bevington.....	4699	Mr. Harper.....	4703
Václav Havel		Mr. Rae.....	4703
Mr. Sopuck.....	4699	Mr. Harper.....	4704
Black History Month		Mr. Rae.....	4704
Ms. Sgro.....	4700	Mr. Harper.....	4704
Israel		Aboriginal Affairs	
Mr. Adler.....	4700	Mr. Angus.....	4704
Sealing Industry		Mr. Duncan (Vancouver Island North).....	4704
Mr. Cleary.....	4700	Mr. Angus.....	4704
The Economy		Mr. Duncan (Vancouver Island North).....	4704
Ms. Young (Vancouver South).....	4700	Government Services	
The Economy		Mr. Boulerice.....	4704
Ms. Adams.....	4700	Ms. Finley.....	4704
Black History Month		Mr. Boulerice.....	4704
Ms. Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine).....	4701	Ms. Finley.....	4704
Black History Month		Airline Security	
Ms. James.....	4701	Mr. Garrison.....	4705
Black History Month		Mr. Lebel.....	4705
Mr. Benskin.....	4701	Mr. Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord).....	4705
Royal Canadian Mounted Police		Mr. Lebel.....	4705
Mr. Goguen.....	4701	Maternal Health	
B.C. Legislative Assembly Black Rod		Ms. Boivin.....	4705
Ms. Murray.....	4702	Ms. Oda.....	4705
National Defence		Ms. Davies (Vancouver East).....	4705
Ms. Findlay.....	4702	Ms. Oda.....	4705
The Conservative Government		Official Languages	
Mr. Dionne Labelle.....	4702	Mr. Aubin.....	4705
Foreign Affairs		Mr. Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam).....	4706
Mr. Toet.....	4702	Pensions	
		Mr. Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte).....	4706
		Ms. Finley.....	4706
		Access to Information	
		Mr. Simms.....	4706
		Mr. Clement.....	4706
		The Environment	
		Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North).....	4706
		Mr. Kent.....	4706
		Post-Secondary Education	
		Ms. Sitsabaiesan.....	4706
		Ms. Finley.....	4707
		Mr. Dubé.....	4707
		Ms. Finley.....	4707
		International Co-operation	
		Ms. Sims.....	4707
		Ms. Oda.....	4707
		Ms. Sims.....	4707
		Ms. Oda.....	4707

ORAL QUESTIONS

La justice			
Mrs. Turmel.....	4702		
Mr. Harper.....	4702		
Mrs. Turmel.....	4703		
Mr. Harper.....	4703		
Pensions			
Mrs. Turmel.....	4703		
Mr. Harper.....	4703		
Mr. Julian.....	4703		
Ms. Finley.....	4703		
Mr. Julian.....	4703		

International Trade	
Mr. Merrifield	4707
Mr. Fast	4707
National Defence	
Mr. Kellway	4707
Mr. Fantino	4708
Mr. Kellway	4708
Mr. Fantino	4708
Government Contracts	
Ms. Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	4708
Mr. MacKay	4708
Ms. Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	4708
Mr. MacKay	4708
Foreign Affairs	
Mr. Karygiannis	4708
Mr. Kenney	4709
Airline Security	
Mr. Trudeau	4709
Mr. Lebel	4709
Labour	
Mr. Christopherson	4709
Mr. Paradis	4709
Forestry Industry	
Mr. Ravignat	4709
Mr. Lebel	4709
Public Safety	
Mr. Butt	4709
Mr. Toews	4710
Fisheries and Oceans	
Mr. MacAulay	4710
Mr. Ashfield	4710
Infrastructure	
Ms. Michaud	4710
Mr. Lebel	4710
Employment	
Mrs. Block	4710
Ms. Finley	4710
Veterans	
Ms. Papillon	4710
Mr. Blaney	4710
Pensions	
Mr. Plamondon	4711
Ms. Finley	4711
Presence in the Gallery	
The Speaker	4711
Business of the House	
Mr. Van Loan	4711
Points of Order	
Oral Questions	
Mr. Warawa	4711
Ms. Boivin	4711
Mr. Stoffer	4711

Mr. Thibeault	4711
---------------------	------

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

International Trade	
Mr. Fast	4711
Foreign Affairs	
Mr. Obhrai	4712
Committees of the House	
Health	
Mrs. Smith	4712
Petitions	
The Environment	
Mr. Hsu	4712
Suicide Prevention	
Mr. Albrecht	4712
Multiple Sclerosis	
Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North)	4712
DNA Missing Persons Database	
Mr. Boughen	4712
Shark Finning	
Ms. May	4712
The Environment	
Ms. May	4712
Falun Gong	
Mr. Anders	4712
Abortion	
Mr. Cannan	4712
The Environment	
Mr. Cannan	4713
Questions on the Order Paper	
Mr. Lukiwski	4713
Motions for Papers	
Mr. Lukiwski	4713

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

Pooled Registered Pension Plans Act	
Bill C-25. Second reading	4713
Mr. Opitz	4713
Mr. Hyer	4714
Mr. Lamoureux	4714
Mr. Adler	4714
Mr. Cleary	4715
Mrs. McLeod	4716
Mr. Lamoureux	4716
Ms. Borg	4716
Mr. Norlock	4717
Mrs. Day	4718
Mr. Lamoureux	4718
Mr. Lamoureux	4718
Mr. Norlock	4719
Mr. Harris (St. John's East)	4720
Mr. Poilievre	4720
Mr. Sullivan	4721
Mr. Simms	4722
Ms. May	4722

Mrs. Day	4722
Mr. Stewart	4723
Mr. Hyer	4724
Mr. Adler	4724
Mr. Harris (Scarborough Southwest)	4725
Mr. Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte)	4725
Mrs. Gallant	4725
Mr. Angus	4725
Ms. May	4727
Mr. Lamoureux	4727
Mrs. Gallant	4727
Mr. Bezan	4728
Motion agreed to	4729
(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)	4729

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Infrastructure

Motion	4729
Motion negatived	4730

National Flag of Canada

Bill C-288. Second reading	4730
Motion agreed to	4731

(Bill read the second time and referred to a committee)	4732
---	------

Parliament of Canada Act

Bill C-306. Second reading	4732
Mr. Lamoureux	4732
Ms. Latendresse	4733
Mr. Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)	4734
Mr. Dubé	4736
Mr. Caron	4737
Ms. Doré Lefebvre	4738
Mr. Ravignat	4739
Division on motion deferred	4740

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

Natural Resources

Ms. Leslie	4740
Mr. Anderson	4740

The Environment

Ms. Duncan (Etobicoke North)	4741
Ms. Rempel	4742

Service Canada

Mr. Cuzner	4742
Ms. Rempel	4743

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