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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, May 31, 2012

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, May 31, 2012

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

ACCESS TO INFORMATION

The Speaker: I have the honour to lay upon the table, pursuant to subsection 39(1) of the Access to Information Act, a special report of the Information Commissioner, entitled “Measuring Up: Improvements and Ongoing Concerns in Access to Information 2008-2009 to 2010-2011”.

[*Translation*]

This report is deemed permanently referred to the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics.

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[*English*]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(a), I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 26th report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in relation to a question of privilege: the free movement of members within the parliamentary precinct.

Mr. Joe Comartin (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wanted to take the opportunity to respond to the report. My party, the NDP, has prepared a dissenting opinion with regard to the recommendations that came from the procedures and House affairs committee.

This is a very important issue with regard to the practice of the privileges of our members of Parliament. We have a long tradition of an absolute right to unimpeded access to the House. There have been a number of times that the committee in the past has looked at this in the way of a motion as a result of determinations by yourself, Mr. Speaker, and other speakers, your predecessors. We have consistently retained that right as an absolute. It was always expressed as an absolute.

What I am very concerned about in the report that came out through the majority of the committee members on the government side is that it made no finding of breach of privilege in this case. It is quite clear from the facts that at least several members have been improperly impeded on those occasions from accessing the House in order for them to do their parliamentary work.

We have recommended in the dissenting opinion that there be a finding that privileges were breached and then, as the main report does, made some recommendations. Unfortunately, the main report made a major concession, as we saw it.

There is always this issue of a balance between the historical absolute right of our members of Parliament to access the House and precinct unimpeded versus—and this is where we get into the balance argument—the question of security.

The security issue, Mr. Speaker, as I am sure you are quite aware, only comes up as a significant concern when we have international visitors and the risk is raised significantly. For instance, when the President of the United States was here, there were problems. When the Prime Minister of Israel was here, there were problems, which is what this is about.

The government side is saying in the report, in effect, that security trumps. We are saying no, there are alternatives. We set those out in three very specific recommendations, that there are alternatives, that the absolute right should remain and that security can still be taken care of and all those concerns met. That is why we presented the dissenting report.

HUMAN RESOURCES, SKILLS AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE STATUS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 5th report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons With Disabilities, in relation to the main estimates 2012-13.

* * *

[*Translation*]

SPECIES AT RISK ACT

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-426, An Act to amend the Species at Risk Act (funding of atlassing)

He said: I rise in the House today to introduce a bill to amend the Species at Risk Act. My bill deals specifically with the funding of atlassing or enumeration.

Routine Proceedings

The enactment amends the Species at Risk Act to ensure that funds for the enumeration of a species, in connection with the financing of programs and measures for the conservation of wildlife species, are paid to the persons responsible before the enumeration of the species begins; that is the essence of this bill.

I would like to thank the hon. member for Laval—Les Îles, a member of the Standing Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development, for supporting this motion.

I have received statements from at least half a dozen associations and organizations in eastern Quebec alone. They have been promised funding in November or December to enumeration of a species. Endangered species often come to Canada in March, April or July, but the organizations receive the funding only in September or October. In some cases, the organizations have almost missed the opportunity to enumerate the species because they have to find a bank that will loan them money to hire people with the appropriate expertise to do the atlassing or enumeration.

At any rate, since it would not cost the public purse any extra to pay those people on time, this new measure would allow the organizations to do the atlassing with no administrative problems.

I personally believe that the House should take care of this simple administrative formality and pay them on time so that they can hire competent people and ensure the future of endangered species in Canada.

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

* * *

[*English*]

INCOME TAX ACT

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-427, An Act to amend the Income Tax Act (income averaging for artists).

He said: Mr. Speaker, this is a proud and humbling moment for me. I have lobbied for this for at least a decade before joining the House.

This bill would help independent artists who do not have access to employment insurance and the Canada pension plan during feast or famine years. All independent artists can have a number of lean years. Then, if they are blessed, they will land something that shoots them up into the stratosphere. The bill intends to make it a little easier in regards to averaging their tax burden for that year over four or five years.

Many artists have looked for this. I know members of the House on the opposite side have heard that for a number of years. It would bring a sense of fairness to the people who contribute to this country in large measure.

Therefore, I stand here today to introduce this bill.

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

● (1010)

[*Translation*]

PETITIONS

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Madam Speaker, it is my pleasure to present a petition on behalf of residents of my riding who support international co-operation, and in particular an organization called Development and Peace.

They have signed this petition denouncing the cuts affecting non-governmental organizations whose reputation is beyond reproach and which have been involved in international co-operation for very many years.

In the case of Development and Peace, \$35 million will be eliminated over five years, and this is completely unacceptable. This organization supports over 250 partners in 40 countries.

In essence, this petition calls for the funding to Development and Peace to be restored and for Canada to increase its international aid.

[*English*]

WINE INDUSTRY

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC): Madam Speaker, I rise today to bring attention to the House a petition that I received from my constituents in my riding of Niagara West—Glanbrook. The petitioners call upon the House of Commons and Parliament to vote in favour of Bill C-311, an act to amend the importation of intoxicating liquors act (interprovincial importation of wine for personal use).

With over 40 wineries in my riding of Niagara West—Glanbrook, this piece of legislation is near and dear to me and my constituents. I echo the sentiments of these petitioners and urge all of my hon. colleagues to vote in favour of the bill.

There is a pressing need to modernize the 1928 federal Importation of Intoxicating Liquors Act with a personal exemption for the purchase and shipment of wine across provincial borders. Allowing interprovincial importation of wine for personal use would greatly benefit not only the hard-working men and women of my riding but also Canadians from coast to coast who would soon be able to experience the extravagant array of wines grown not only in Niagara Peninsula but across our great nation.

POVERTY

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Madam Speaker, I have a petition from a number of residents in my riding, which I will attempt to summarize.

These petitioners are very concerned about the effects of poverty. Ten percent of Canadians live in poverty in a country that is incredibly rich. Among those are aboriginal people, recent immigrants and persons living with disabilities. We know that one in eight children in this country live in poverty.

Routine Proceedings

The petitioners ask the Government of Canada to implement Bill C-233. This bill would require the federal government to develop and implement a strategy for poverty elimination in consultation, of course, with the provinces, territories, municipalities and aboriginal governments. Civil society is very concerned about the effects of poverty on our entire community.

• (1015)

PENSIONS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Madam Speaker, residents of Winnipeg North have made a fairly strong statement by signing petitions regarding the government's decision to increase the age to apply for OAS from 65 to 67. They believe that people should continue to have the option to retire at age 65 and that the government should not in any way diminish the importance and value of Canada's three major seniors programs: OAS, GIS and CPP.

RIGHTS OF THE UNBORN

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Madam Speaker, I have three petitions.

The first petition is mainly from the county of Grand Valley, the village of Grand Valley, the town of Orangeville and the town of Shelburne in my riding.

Canada's 400-year-old definition of human beings says a child does not become a human being until the moment of complete birth, contrary to 21st century medical evidence. Parliament has a solemn duty to reject any law that says some human beings are not human.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons and Parliament assembled to confirm that every human being is recognized by Canadian law as human by amending section 223 of our Criminal Code in such a way as to reflect 21st century medical evidence.

ABORTION

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Madam Speaker, the second petition is from basically the same towns in my riding. It is similar to the first, but it is worded differently.

Canada is the only nation in the western world and in the company of China and North Korea without any laws restricting abortion. Canada's Supreme Court has said it is Parliament's responsibility to enact abortion legislation. The petitioners call upon the House of Commons and Parliament assembled to speedily enact legislation that restricts abortion to the greatest extent possible.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC): Madam Speaker, my third petition is from people all over Canada who are concerned with the proposed megaquarry in Melancthon Township in Dufferin County. It would be the largest open-pit quarry in Canada, at over 2,300 acres.

The petitioners are concerned with a number of things, one of which is that the proposed megaquarry threatens the Grand and Nottawasaga River watersheds, including various freshwater fish species. The petitioners ask that the Government of Canada conduct an environmental assessment under the authority of the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act on the proposed Highland Companies' megaquarry development.

[*Translation*]

HUMAN RIGHTS

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, I rise today to present two petitions. The first relates to human rights, particularly in China.

[*English*]

This petition is from members of the public in Mississauga, Toronto and the vicinity who are offended by the continued persecution of people practising Falun Dafa or Falun Gong within China.

The petitioners call on the Government of Canada and the Minister of Foreign Affairs to impress upon the Chinese government the importance of human rights to Canada.

The petition is timely as we are creating more investment opportunities for China without environmental reviews as a driving force behind Bill C-38. It is important that we give this petition attention.

SHARK FINNING

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, the other petition is from residents of my own constituency of Saanich—Gulf Islands, residents from Mayne Island and Saturna Island, who are calling upon the House to take action to end the practice of shark finning. More than 70 million sharks are killed annually through this barbaric practice for the purpose of one important ceremony, but one dish should not wipe out a species.

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QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURNS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Madam Speaker, if Question No. 593 could be made an order for return, this return would be tabled immediately.

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*Text*]

Question No. 593—**Hon. Scott Brison:**

With regard to the 2010 strategic reviews included in Table 5.1 in Budget 2011 (and also included in Table 6.7 of Budget 2012 under Budget 2011 spending restraint), what is the breakdown of expected savings for each department, agency and organization in each of the fiscal years 2011-2012, 2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2017, and ongoing?

(Return tabled)

[*English*]

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

The Deputy Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

*Business of Supply***GOVERNMENT ORDERS**

● (1020)

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

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

That this House call on the Conservative government to abandon plans to further restrict access to Employment Insurance for Canadian workers who have followed the rules and who will now be forced to choose between taking a pay cut of up to 30% or losing their Employment Insurance benefits.

She said: Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles.

I am pleased to move, on behalf of the entire NDP caucus, a motion calling on the Conservative government to abandon its reckless changes to Canada's employment insurance system.

First and foremost, employment insurance must be about providing a safety net for workers. Government ministers and Conservative MPs keep saying that jobs are not being filled because the unemployed do not want to work, but Statistics Canada pointed out just last week that there were almost six unemployed workers for every reported job vacancy in Canada. In other words, despite its rhetoric, the Conservative government's record on job creation has been an abject failure.

Therefore, yes, this is the time that workers need to draw on the employment insurance that they paid into all of their working lives. However, instead of helping workers to access what is rightfully theirs, the minister responsible for the program hurls insults by saying, "We do not want to make it lucrative for them to stay home and get paid for it". It is outrageous. Workers need EI, not so they can stay at home but so they can keep their homes.

Even before these ill-advised changes, only 40% of unemployed Canadians were able to access EI benefits, and those who do bring home a maximum of 55% of their former wages. Unemployed workers can assure the minister that EI is not lucrative.

What then motivated this last round of EI reforms? Toronto *Star* columnist, Thomas Walkom, hit the nail squarely on the head when he blamed the changes on "bone-headed ideology and contempt". The Conservatives have continually demonstrated their hatred of Canada's social safety net, including employment insurance, and the disdain starts right at the top.

This is what the Prime Minister told the American Council for National Policy in 1997. He said:

In terms of the unemployed, of which we have over a million-and-a-half, don't feel particularly bad for many of these people. They don't feel bad about it themselves, as long as they're receiving generous social assistance and unemployment insurance.

He also derided Atlantic Canadians for using social services, saying in 2002:

I think in Atlantic Canada, because of what happened in the decades following Confederation, there is a culture of defeat that we have to overcome.... Atlantic Canada's culture of defeat will be hard to overcome as long as Atlantic Canada is actually physically trailing the rest of the country.

As Walkom rightly points out, "The contempt is that of comfortable, well-heeled politicians who, deep down, assume that those unfortunate enough to have lost their jobs lack moral fibre". However, the issue is not that Canadians do not want to work. The issue is that there are no jobs available in many parts of our country. Yes, that means that Canadians will try to access employment insurance. It is, after all, a program that was designed to help the jobless get by while they search for work.

As things stand right now, regular EI covers up to 55% of former salary to a maximum of \$485 a week for up to 45 weeks. Last year, 850,000 people relied on the program, including thousands in my hometown of Hamilton where the manufacturing sector has been particularly hard hit. If one were to ask people who have tried to access employment insurance, they would be the first to point out that the system does need reform. The reforms just are not in the direction that the government is moving. We need to enhance, not restrict, access to EI for Canadians who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

As it stands now, less than half of the unemployed qualify for EI benefits. Only 40% of men collect and an even lower 32% of women get any support from EI. The reason is that the rules are biased against part-time, temporary, self-employed and women workers, yet all workers pay into the system.

The conversation we should be having in this chamber is about how we enhance access to the benefits that employees and employers paid for. It is only the workers and the employers who contribute to the EI system. There is not a dime of the government's money in the pot and yet successive Liberal and Conservative governments have raided the surpluses in the EI fund to the tune of \$57 billion. They have treated it as their own cash cow to fund everything from debt reduction to new government programs and now it has the audacity to suggest that the program is too lucrative for workers and that things need to change. It is completely outrageous.

● (1025)

If we are going to change the system at all, we should live up to the commitments made by the motion on EI reform that I tabled here in the last Parliament, which, I might add, was passed by the House of Commons. That motion called for the elimination of the two-week waiting period, a lower qualifying period that was consistent across our country, an increase in the replacement wage to 60%, improved funding for training and a mechanism for allowing the self-employed to participate in the program.

Three years later, the government has still only acted on the will of Parliament with respect to one of those proposals, and that is making EI available to the self-employed. All other tinkering the Conservatives have done with respect to the EI system has been counter to the spirit of my motion and has been at the expense rather than to the benefit of hard-working Canadians.

Business of Supply

We need to just look at the changes resulting from the most recent Conservative budget. Budget 2012 announced the Conservative government's intention to introduce legislation "to strengthen and clarify what is required of claimants who are receiving regular EI benefits and are looking for work". Instead, the Trojan Horse bill, Bill C-38, gave the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development the power to create regulations concerning what constitutes suitable employment and reasonable and customary efforts to find employment.

When asked what the regulations would look like, the minister responded, "We haven't announced those details yet. We want to make sure the legislation gets through first". Really. Do the Conservatives want us to buy a pig in a poke? That will not happen and the more details we learn, the more we know just how misguided the government's approach has become.

Under the new scheme, frequent EI claimants will no longer be able to hold out for something akin to their former jobs at roughly the same wage. Instead, they will need to accept similar work at as little as 80% of their previous wage during the first seven weeks of benefits, yet we do not know what "similar" means. After that, they must take any work they are qualified to perform for as little as 70% of what they used to make. Less frequent users will fare marginally better. They can hold out for jobs within their usual occupation at 90% of their former wage for 18 weeks. After that, they, too, must accept similar jobs at 80% of their previous wage.

Obviously this has nothing to do with connecting workers with suitable jobs. This is all about driving down wages. The Conservatives love free markets unless, of course, it is a labour market. One has to wonder though for whom they are doing this.

Yes, these changes will help their friends in the tar sands hire temporary foreign workers who can now be paid 15% less than the going regional wage. At the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development, where we have been studying the projected shortages of skilled workers in Canada, many employers have actually come forward to tell us that forcing workers in seasonal industries to do other work during the off season will do permanent harm to their businesses and, indeed, to their entire regions. That, of course, is due to out-migration.

If the fisherman's helpers, forestry workers or farmhands are forced during the respective off-season to take on a job they do not like and that pays less, they will be more inclined to head to western Canada. That leaves local businesses high and dry.

When we combine that attack on rural Canada with the fact that stripping Canadians of their employment insurance will lead to an increased reliance on provincial social support systems, it is no wonder that premiers from across the country are crying foul. Despite the fact that it is their provincial budgets and their provincial taxpayers who will pay the price for these ill-conceived changes to Canada's EI system, none of them were consulted before the changes were announced.

As an editorial in the Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* put it:

This is clearly an issue that needs a national debate—one we were robbed of when the government stuffed the changes into its omnibus bill.

That is why the New Democrats have brought this motion to the floor of the House today. We do need a national debate on the changes to Canada's employment insurance system and the people who pay for that system and who use it must have a say in its future. Until then, we must change course and abandon all plans to further restrict access to employment insurance for Canadian workers.

● (1030)

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened with interest to my colleague across the way and at one point I could hardly contain myself because she was decrying the fact that a Canadian might actually need to take employment at 80% of his or her previous wage. Is it not terrible to take employment at 80% of one's previous wage? Is that not better than accepting employment insurance, which is only 55% of the previous wage?

In addition, employment insurance payment comes from the very people who are causing the opportunities for employment. The employers in this country and the employees are paying into that. Claimants are taking that money.

Would it not be better to earn 80% and have a productive, meaningful job and the self-esteem that comes from that job rather than sitting at home and receiving 55% of one's previous employment wage?

Ms. Chris Charlton: Madam Speaker, I appreciate the question, because clearly the member opposite does not understand the point of employment insurance.

Of course Canadians want to be working. In my hometown of Hamilton, where the manufacturing sector has been decimated, people are desperate to find decent, family-sustaining jobs.

This is not about blaming people who have lost jobs through no fault of their own. This is about making sure those workers have an opportunity to find work at a comparable wage in their field. What is the point of having nurses, go and become farmhands, picking apples. Yes, it is a shame for nurses but it is also a loss to the Canadian economy. It is loss to our health care system.

We absolutely need to provide opportunities for people to work in their field, in their profession. That is what employment insurance is about. That is why workers pay into employment insurance. That is why even employers are suggesting the system is flawed and the changes are flawed. We need to make sure we can keep people working in the field of their choice.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I appreciate the comments of the member. In terms of the government's claimed objective of creating jobs, so far it has proven to be a not very successful strategy on its part, with hundreds of thousands fewer full-time jobs today than before the recession.

Business of Supply

This EI change would force workers to take a job outside their area of training and farther away from home. The government is claiming this is about jobs, while at the same time it is completely cutting the community access program, which was support for libraries to provide Internet service and coaching for that 20% of community members who might need that to look for a job. How do those two things square in the member's view?

Ms. Chris Charlton: Madam Speaker, that is an excellent question. I want to respond to both.

First of all, the member is absolutely right. The best way to help unemployed Canadians is with an appropriate job-creation strategy, something the government has done absolutely nothing about. Right now for every six unemployed people in Canada, there is only one job. Unemployment is going to continue unless the government actually gets serious about a job-creation strategy.

Second, the member talks about the CAP program. It is worth noting that of Canadian households that make less than \$30,000 a year, 40% of those households actually do not have Internet access. These new changes to the EI system will send people job alerts on the Internet. If people are not able to access those job alerts and those job postings, then the government is not helping them at all. This is a really ill-conceived system. The government needs to go back to the drawing board.

Let us not move forward on the changes the government is proposing. Let us have consultations with Canadians in rural and remote areas and in households that do not have Internet access. Let us get the changes right, and let us improve rather than restrict access to employment insurance.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Madam Speaker, I am very pleased today to be able to talk about employment insurance and the consequences for the working people who will be affected.

We decided to present this motion today for one simple reason: as we speak, there are many working people, whether they are seasonal workers or workers who have worked somewhere else in one way or another, from sea to sea, from coast to coast to coast, who are in a situation where they will be denied their employment insurance benefits in future.

The Conservatives say this is not the case and people will not be denied that income. We know very well, however, that a seasonal worker, in Prince Edward Island for example, has no opportunity to find what is called suitable employment. This means that after six weeks they will be required to accept employment that might pay only 70% of their earnings. They will have no choice, because no other jobs are available. Canada does not have large cities from coast to coast to coast. Jobs really are not available everywhere in the country.

Fishers only fish in the fishing season. We know that between fishing seasons, they have to spend time on their boats and equipment. It was agreed that they could spend this time attending to their boats and equipment. Now, they have to agree to go and work about an hour's drive from home.

The Conservatives do not understand what a region is, and what local and regional development are. We know that Canada is not an overpopulated country and the regions are the biggest part of the country.

If the bill is adopted, these new measures will have a huge impact across the country in terms of local and regional development.

These new measures were hidden in a Trojan Horse, in a budget. They should have been debated in the House independently from the budget. It is inconceivable that the Conservatives included amendments to 70 laws—amendments that were completely hidden—in a mammoth budget implementation bill.

Frequent employment insurance claimants in the regions will be told that they have to accept employment.

Let us talk about the tourist season. Many regions make their living from tourism. This is true of Quebec's Charlevoix region, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and all through the eastern provinces and other places.

At the end of the fishing season, fishers have to give up their activities and accept a job that will be offered to them after a month or six weeks have elapsed. Therefore they have no opportunity to repair their boats. If they want to pick up their work again the following year, at the start of the fishing season, they will have to leave their jobs. These fishers are in danger because their boats will not be properly maintained and freshly equipped. Moreover, they will probably have to hire people who will not be trained for fishing because the fishers who accepted other jobs will no longer be available.

The number of workers is not very high in the regions. It is not like in the city. Local and regional development is very different. This must be taken into account.

Commuting for an hour in Montreal is really not a problem. Commuters take the metro or a bus, and that is fine. Forcing people to travel for an hour in the regions is dangerous.

It is a one-hour drive from Forestville to Sept-Îles. There are very few houses between the two points. There are only one or two, and about 100 in Pessamit, a reserve where the concentration is a little higher, or small villages like Ragueneau and Chute-aux-Outardes. Apart from that, it is just one big, long drive. A one-hour drive is 100 km.

• (1035)

This means that every morning and every night people have to travel 100 km through little villages to get to where someone is offering a job. This is unacceptable. We cannot ask people to travel an hour every morning and every evening to get to their place of work. Who will take care of the children? Who will get the children from school? When school finishes at 4:30 p.m. or when the school bus brings the children back home, who will take care of them at home?

Business of Supply

People who live outside of cities are likely to be uprooted, because they are going to have to move to the larger centres. As we have often seen, rural areas have been drained of people, because people have moved to cities in a self-imposed exile in the search for a job. This is something that has affected young people enormously because, of course, they went away to study at university and did not go back home, because they relocated to wherever the jobs were.

Now the population in rural areas has just about reached its minimum level. The fact that people have to leave rural areas means that the people who decide to stay will be impoverished. There are not really many jobs in rural areas. There are a few small shopping centres that are often located in the largest town. I am thinking of a place like Bonaventure in the Gaspé that has a population of 3,000; Rimouski has about 30,000 people; Baie-Comeau has about 35,000 or 40,000 inhabitants; and Sept-Îles where of course the population is increasing right now because of Quebec's Plan Nord, the northern plan. Basically, there are not that many services that can be offered to people.

So people will be uprooted. People will have to leave rural areas. What will happen to our tourist regions? People who do not agree to leave their own regions in order to take jobs somewhere else will have to be happy with their income or look to social assistance, the first kind of income security. This security is, of course, a safety net, but it is synonymous with the status of the poorest of the poor in society. If we talk about income security in terms of social assistance, people will find themselves to be poorer than ever.

This law will impoverish Canadians. It will impoverish those who cannot abandon their homes and move to larger centres. This law will also impoverish the regions. That is what people in New Brunswick, Quebec, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland are concerned about. It seems that the Atlantic provinces will be impoverished by this bill, more than the provinces that have a larger concentration of jobs.

For example, it is not true that people will automatically move to the far north where there are mining developments or major projects. Some will do so by choice, but others will not, because they have to take care of their families and their homes in the community where they live. Not everyone can just pick up and leave.

Naturally, those who want to go to work in those locations will do so because the wages offered by large corporations are very good, for example, those offered by the large oil companies in the far north. We know that the oil companies will bring about all sorts of development and workers will be needed. Some will go work there voluntarily; it seems that often it is young people who choose to do so. Those who have moved around to plant trees will now move to go and work where there are jobs. One does not preclude the other.

However, when the people in our regions are offered employment, there are two things that must be considered: training and individual choice. Workers are human beings. They are not merely pawns on a chessboard to be moved around at will. A pawn must go where it is placed and that is it. Life does not work like that.

In conclusion, I would like to say that it is important to take into account that workers are human beings.

● (1040)

[English]

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Madam Speaker, I listened to the member's speech quite intently. She talked about people working for a number of months, then not being able to work and taking employment insurance, which pays only 55% of their income, up to a maximum income of \$45,000. So, that would be 55% of \$45,000.

I wonder if she is aware that human resources professionals will always say that the person who is more likely to find a new job is the person who is currently working.

From that perspective would she not agree that it is better for people to be working at a job that pays 70% or 80% of their previous income while they are looking for that next job rather than not to have a job and only be earning 55% of their former earnings? Perhaps she would comment on that.

● (1045)

[Translation]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Madam Speaker, that is quite a strange argument. I have heard that argument twice this morning. We are MPs, and when we are no longer members of this House, we would be better off to accept a job that pays 40% of our salary. It does not work like that. People want to find a job where they are paid roughly the same amount for doing similar work.

If I were a psychologist and I were offered a job that paid 70% of my salary, I would try to find a job that paid the full amount. Furthermore, we are telling society that it is acceptable to pay people up to 70% of their wages once they have been unemployed for six weeks. The government says that it is better for workers to be paid 70% than 55%. Workers would be impoverished. The next time, they would again have to accept 70% of their new wages.

Where will it stop? At minimum wage?

[English]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I first have a point of clarification. My colleague from the NDP had noted a cautionary gesture about how this will devastate Atlantic Canada, and it will have a huge impact on Atlantic Canada. Over 50% of the regional GDP is based around seasonal industries. Moreover, 39% of seasonal workers in this country are in the province of Quebec, so it would have a huge impact on the province of Quebec.

I like my colleague's comments because the questions coming from the government today factor around somebody who would take a cut in income because of the reduction in the new rules. What they fail to understand is that in a lot of these rural communities where people work in one or two different seasonal jobs, they do not have access to public transportation or child care. The single parents trying to knit together an annual income and support two industries, for example, do not have access to these supports. A lot of the time it is just a math equation telling them that they cannot afford to take lesser dollars working at a particular job.

I would like the member's comments on that particular issue.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Madam Speaker, that is a fact, and it has a huge impact on single-parent families and women, among others.

It is not possible under the current system. In Quebec, mayors of small municipalities are saying that it is not really a good thing. I will also talk about business owners' associations because that is something I believe the members opposite will understand. For decades, these associations have been condemning the way employment insurance has been hijacked to provide seasonal workers with incomes greater than social assistance during idle times, or the so-called seasonal gap.

This will have a huge impact on seasonal workers and on a portion of the GDP.

Mr. Jean Rousseau (Compton—Stanstead, NDP): Madam Speaker, I want to commend my colleague on her excellent speech.

I would like to know what the social impacts might be on certain communities and on the mental health of those who will have to make greater efforts than before—and I am not talking about adding an extra hour to their commute. It may be extremely difficult for people to take on new jobs, as opposed to the work for which they are already qualified.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day: Madam Speaker, this will have a significant impact.

Construction workers are seasonal employees who are accustomed to doing certain work. If specific training is not provided to help them get other employment, they will have to deal with changes that they might not be able to handle mentally, let alone financially.

[English]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Madam Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Simcoe—Grey.

The government cannot support this motion because, quite frankly, it is factually incorrect. The changes to EI that we are introducing aim to ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not. That is why we believe it is important to invest in connecting Canadians with available jobs in their local areas.

First I would like to clarify and correct the record, given that the opposition has been irresponsibly fearmongering. Based on what I have heard here so far this morning, I think it is time that we put a few facts on the record.

• (1050)

[Translation]

These changes are not about forcing people to accept work outside their own area, or taking jobs for which they are not suited.

[English]

The changes are about improving a federal system so that Canadians better understand what the expectations are of them while they are collecting EI. They are about ensuring Canadian workers are made better aware of the opportunities available to them in their own geographic area. They are about helping to ensure that employers have better access to available Canadian workers before hiring temporary foreign workers.

For a moment, let us look at the big picture.

[Translation]

Our country's economic performance continues to be strong in 2012. In fact, between July 2009 and March 2012, more than 750,000 new jobs were created, resulting in the strongest employment growth by far among G7 countries.

Our economic prosperity, however, depends on our ability to meet emerging and growing labour market challenges.

[English]

It depends on our competitiveness and our agility.

Chief among these challenges are skills shortages. According to Statistics Canada, in the fall of last year there were 250,000 job vacancies across the country.

[Translation]

We know that Canadians want to work, but they often face challenges finding work. So what are we going to do to help unemployed workers find jobs?

[English]

As announced in economic action plan 2012, over the next two years our government will invest in connecting unemployed Canadians with available jobs that are in their local area and that match their skills, jobs that maybe these individuals were never aware existed. As part of our announcement, we will be sending job alerts twice per day to Canadians receiving EI. The job alerts would come from many different sources, including the job bank and private sector sources.

We will also be linking the temporary foreign worker program with the EI program to help connect unemployed Canadians with available jobs in their skill range in their geographic area. Today employers are required to provide evidence that they have exhausted their efforts to hire Canadians first; we are simply introducing changes to better connect those employers with Canadians who would be able to work and available for it.

The improvements that we have announced will mean that Canadians receiving EI benefits would always benefit financially from accepting available work. When receiving EI, Canadians receive 55% of their maximum weekly earnings; with our improvements, Canadians would never have to accept work that pays less than 70% of their previous income, and that amount could not be below minimum wage.

[Translation]

These changes are about empowering unemployed workers, helping them get back into the workforce, and focusing resources where they are needed most.

[English]

We are helping Canadians who want to work to get back to work, and we are ensuring all these changes are grounded in common sense and fairness.

Business of Supply

We fully recognize that there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work, particularly in the off season in those parts of the country where much of the economy is based on seasonal industries. For Canadians who live in areas of higher unemployment or areas where the jobs simply do not exist outside the seasonal or specialized industries, employment insurance would be there for them, as it always has been. We announced these changes one week ago today, and I have been very pleased to see that many employers and workers are standing up to say that these changes to the EI system are needed and are important.

Unfortunately, the opposition continues to mislead Canadians, needlessly creating fear and concern. As I have said before, actions speak louder than words, and this opposition motion demonstrates that the opposition members are against making life better for Canadians and their families. They would prefer that we not make any improvements to a system that sometimes discourages people from working.

As a member of a government focused on job creation, economic growth and Canada's long-term prosperity, I stand here today to encourage all members of this House to vote against this flawed, uninformed motion.

● (1055)

[Translation]

EI is an important program here in Canada—and will continue to be. These improvements will introduce new, needed, common-sense efforts to help Canadians get back to work faster.

That is good for the economy, good for employers—and good for Canadians and their families.

[English]

For these reasons, I urge all members of the House to vote against the motion and to support our efforts to connect Canadians with available local jobs.

[Translation]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Madam Speaker, it is hard to be against motherhood and apple pie. This is where I believe the government is wrong: in how it is presenting these changes to employment insurance.

I will give an example. Telling workers that jobs are available and telling employers that workers are available is not the problem; that is the government's responsibility. Imagine that—we actually agree. That is not where the problem lies.

[English]

She is talking about job alerts twice a day. What about people with no computers and no Internet? How are they going to get them?

[Translation]

Most of these people work for minimum wage. They work in tourism and fisheries. The minister says that jobs are available and that people are on employment insurance.

Does the minister think that jobs become available when seasonal workers finish working? Then those jobs become available. If the

government sends seasonal workers from Atlantic Canada to take available jobs in Alberta, who will do the other seasonal jobs?

Has the minister considered the damage that will do to the fishing and tourism industries?

The Deputy Speaker: Order.

I would like to give the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development the opportunity to respond.

Hon. Diane Finley: Madam Speaker, we know one thing. Over 80% of unemployed workers submit their claims online. We know that because we receive those claims.

Simply put, we will work with unemployed people to help them access information in the way that suits them best. We will also meet with unemployed workers to help them search for and find a job. There are always computers available at Service Canada offices to help these people. We will work with and for unemployed Canadians.

[English]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Madam Speaker, the minister appeared yesterday before the human resources committee, and it was a veritable love-in.

I acknowledged, and I am convinced, that two of the initiatives in the recent changes are of benefit to unemployed workers. They are the best weeks provision and the working while on claim provision. Both of those provisions are positive initiatives.

In return, the other half of that love-in was that the minister acknowledged the fact that they were both Liberal pilot projects. However, the Conservatives enhanced the working while on claim provision. I want to be truthful with that particular claim.

What I want to ask is about consultation. As convinced as I am about those two provisions, the other regulations are going to help with the out-migration of communities in Atlantic Canada. Was there any consultation? We know Brad Wall had talked to the Prime Minister. Has the minister spoken with Brad Wall? Is that where the consultation was? He seems to be the only guy that—

● (1100)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

I would like to give the hon. minister the opportunity to respond.

Hon. Diane Finley: Madam Speaker, it is interesting that people are getting caught up in the process on this.

Since last September, as members of Parliament and cabinet ministers, we have been consulting with Canadians right across the country, working Canadians, non-working Canadians and employers. Whatever the subject, it always seems to come back to two things, at least when I am there.

First, how do we get more people back to work more quickly? Employers are concerned because they cannot meet customers' orders, because they do not have the people they need, skilled or unskilled.

Business of Supply

Second, so many people who are on EI have told these employers that they cannot afford to work in the off-season because it will cost them money. We are changing that as of August. People will be able to keep half of what they earn in part-time work while they are on employment insurance because that is better for them and their families and it could well lead to a full-time job.

These are the kind of changes we are bringing in to make sure people are always better off working.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Madam Speaker, I am pleased to respond to the motion from the member for Hamilton Mountain.

As the minister just said, the government will not be supporting the motion. It is unfortunate that yet again the opposition continues to fearmonger and mislead the Canadian public for its own political gain.

Canadians need to know what is exactly being proposed so they understand how these changes will help them get back to work more quickly.

First, let us look at the big picture, the overall economic climate.
[Translation]

Our country's economic performance continues to be strong in 2012. In fact, between July 2009 and March 2012, more than 750,000 new jobs were created, resulting in the strongest employment growth by far among G7 countries.

Our economic prosperity, however, depends on our ability to meet emerging and growing labour market challenges.

[English]

This is why Canadians gave us a strong mandate in the last election to continue implementing our long-term plan for jobs, economic growth and long-term prosperity.

The skills gap and labour shortages are not challenges for the distant future. They are affecting us now and if left unchecked will hinder our ability to prosper as a country.

Chief among these challenges is the growing skills shortage. According to Statistics Canada, in the fall of last year there were 250,000 job vacancies across the country. At the same time, we have areas with high unemployment. This is a paradox of great concern to our government.

[Translation]

We must let Canadians know about locally available jobs to increase growth and productivity, as well as quality of life for Canadians.

[English]

This is why in the economic action plan 2012, we took action to support workers by ensuring EI remains fair and flexible and helps Canadians to find jobs in their local labour market. We know Canadians want to work.

At the same time, we recognize there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work. In many cases Canadians are not

aware of the jobs available in their area and what types of jobs are relevant to their skills.

To help connect available workers with suitable work in their local area, we will be sending job alerts twice a day to Canadians receiving EI. These job alerts will come not only from the job bank that is run by the federal government but also from many different sources, including private sector providers.

Our government is also introducing a connection between the EI program and the temporary foreign worker program to ensure that employers are looking to Canadians first before turning to foreign workers.

However, we also recognize that in many areas of the country there are legitimate labour shortages that are threatening our economic recovery. I can tell this House from personal experience that there are many areas that experience chronic labour shortages, both in skilled and low-skilled occupations.

Whether it was in travelling with the human resources committee or as part of the pre-budget consultations, I have heard from employers from coast to coast to coast, expressing their frustration and fears about not being able to find enough workers. Our businesses have taken all reasonable measures to find Canadians to fill open jobs. They will continue to have access to temporary foreign workers.

In addition to providing more information to Canadians about local jobs, we are also clarifying what constitutes suitable employment and a reasonable job search. This will assist Canadians currently collecting EI in understanding what their responsibilities are while on claim.

Better utilizing Canada's workforce and making Canada's labour market more adaptable will help ensure our long-term economic growth. To be clear, it has always been a requirement of the employment insurance program to be looking for work while receiving EI benefits. Our government understands that every region of our country is different, with varying levels of economic opportunity. We know that every individual has unique circumstances, and we will always take these into account.

As the minister stressed yesterday in committee, the government will ensure changes are fair and reasonable to EI claimants. We are not going to ask EI claimants to uproot their families and find work in another part of the country. We are not going to ask people to work at jobs that are far below their skill level. We are not going to force people to accept unreasonably low wages or bad working conditions. When Canadians are unable to find suitable employment, employment insurance will be there for them, as it always has been.

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What these changes will do is ensure that every EI claimant will earn more money and be better off working than not working. In fact our government is very proud to have also introduced improvements to the working while on claim pilot project in economic action plan 2012. Currently, earnings from employment are clawed back, dollar for dollar, for most of the claimants' earnings on part-time work. Effective August 2012, we will cut the current EI clawback in half, so Canadians can keep more of what they earn. Our government understands that part-time jobs often lead to full-time jobs, as the minister mentioned before. It is always in our nation's best interest to encourage labour force attachment.

Our improvements also mean that Canadians receiving employment insurance benefits will always benefit financially from accepting available work. While on EI, claimants receive 55% of their previous earnings. Through this new definition, a job would have to pay 70% of their previous wage to be considered suitable employment.

This is why the opposition motion is factually incorrect. Canadians who are collecting EI will not face a pay cut of 30%. They in fact will be required to look for work that pays more than they are currently receiving on EI.

These changes are about empowering unemployed workers, helping them get back into the workforce.

● (1105)

[Translation]

Specific circumstances and the local labour market will always be taken into account. Those who do not manage to find a job will, as always, be able to count on the employment insurance program.

[English]

This is why I ask the opposition to stop playing these political games and fearmongering and to support our economic recovery by voting against this motion and supporting job creation in the country.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Madam Speaker, I cannot believe what I am hearing from the other side. I think their diapers are so full that they are drowning in it. They are saying that they are supporting workers, but what are they doing? They are attacking workers.

A while ago, we heard the minister say that people can access Service Canada offices. I am from rural and northern Ontario. Most of my communities do not even have a Service Canada office. Most people in these communities do not even have access to Internet, and the ones who do often have dial-up, so how the heck are they going to get notices? I am just taken aback. Maybe the member could answer how people are going to be able to get that information.

The government is talking about the workers of this country. I have a lot of people in my riding who are unemployed and who are looking for jobs. What they need is access to skills training. That is what they need. The first nations in my communities, what do they need? They need better access to education. How will the government address that? Why is the government not addressing that instead, so people are able to get jobs?

● (1110)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Madam Speaker, I am rather disappointed at the level of comment by the member opposite at the beginning of her statement.

That being said, I would not want to be a constituent in her riding. She is essentially saying that these people are not capable of finding access to the Internet, let alone other tools. I have a rural riding as well. Individuals in my riding spend a significant amount of time being able to educate themselves, being able to look for employment. They do these things.

As we have stated, the reason we are putting in place these changes is that Canadians want to work. We are going to give them the tools. We are going to facilitate and aid them to be able to acquire a job, so they can actually move maybe from a part-time to a full-time job or from being unemployed to being in a part-time and then a full-time job.

This is about job creation and making sure Canadians can get back to work.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I certainly would not want to cut off my colleague for Cape Breton—Canso, but I am sure he will be up later this afternoon for an important intervention.

I was hoping to ask the parliamentary secretary about this notion of commuting one hour to find a job that, in some parts of the country, would not exist one hour away. However, let us say that there is this magical year-round job that is well-paying and is one hour away.

For a person living in rural New Brunswick, there is no public transit. As I have said before, the closest subway to my riding is in Boston. The idea is that somehow a person could commute 100 kilometres, which would be a one-hour commute in New Brunswick, might not have a car or a second car, to accept a job that pays 70% of what their previous job paid. If they worked for \$11 or \$12 an hour in New Brunswick, they would commute effectively for a minimum wage job. How does she think that is fair to a single parent in my riding who, economically, would not be able to make that work?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Madam Speaker, I would just say to the member opposite that I encourage him to read the details of what has been outlined. Whether it be transportation availability or certain personal circumstances, such as a health concern or personal family circumstances, those are taken into consideration on whether or not an individual would be accepting suitable employment. I encourage the member to actually read the details of our proposal.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Madam Speaker, as a former human resources manager, I know it is really important that people get out to work, not only for the economy or for business but for themselves and the self-respect they get from being employed.

Can the parliamentary secretary inform this House of the specific number of individuals who are currently eligible for EI and how these changes we are discussing will positively impact those claimants?

Business of Supply

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Madam Speaker, the one thing this is all focused on is making sure individuals can get back to work. I will read a quote:

The one area I do commend the government for looking at is removing disincentives for people who take, for example, part-time work. Too often we penalize people who wanted to go to work and wanted to make a contribution, and we're moving in the right direction for removing...those penalties.

That is from the hon. Perrin Beatty, current president and chief economic officer for the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

The one thing I will say is that we want to make sure that as many people as possible have an opportunity for a job. That is what these initiatives are focused on.

[Translation]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I would like to start by saying that I plan on sharing my time with my colleague, the member for Random—Burin—St. George's.

First, I would like to thank our NDP colleagues and particularly the member for Hamilton Mountain for bringing this discussion before the House. I would also like to say that we plan on enthusiastically supporting the NDP motion because we think that this issue affects a large number of people and has raised a lot of concerns, particularly among people who work in seasonal industries.

● (1115)

[English]

My colleague from Cape Breton—Canso, in a question to the minister, said something important. One element of the budget, which we thought was positive, was the idea that the pilot projects that were established in 2005 to calculate weekly earnings based on the best 14 weeks, if that is what the divisor is in the economic region where one resides, was an important improvement. Previously, it had been calculated on the most recent weeks and not best weeks, so there was an unintended consequence of actually discouraging people from taking available work if it were for a day, two days or three days because it had a perverse effect the year after of diminishing the employment insurance benefits people may need at a time of year when they have no work. That was an important step. I am glad that was renewed and that it will be rolled out nationally. That will help Canadians seeking work across the country.

The other important element is the working-while-on-claim provision. It will only be a two year pilot project. I hope that becomes a permanent part of the Employment Insurance Act, especially for people who run a bed and breakfast in rural New Brunswick or an auberge. After the tourist season is over, they often cannot remain open beyond certain months in the fall. They may want to stay open on weekends in November and December, have Christmas parties or host families coming together at that time of year but they cannot find employees. If they do show up for work when work is available, they would be punished at some future time in their employment insurance benefits. I am glad those changes were recognized as having been positive.

[Translation]

A group of workers and employers in my riding, specifically in the Cap-Pelé and Bouctouche areas, worked together to bring these changes before Parliament and before the Liberal government at the time. Rodrigue Landry, co-chair of this committee, and an employee of a fish processing plant in the Cap-Pelé area in my riding, were part of it. There was also an employee from Westmorland Fisheries, who worked with Ronald LeBlanc, and other employers. Aline Landry was also involved. I am pleased to see that this is continuing.

However, I must say that there is an enormous amount of concern across Canada regarding the employment insurance reforms that this government is proposing.

[English]

This is a national concern. It is not a concern in rural New Brunswick only. It is not only a concern in eastern Quebec or northern Ontario. These regions will be among the hardest hit by the changes the Conservatives are proposing.

Right here on Parliament Hill there are workers who are in seasonal employment. The people who work in the food service sector, in the cafeterias and the restaurant in this very building, find themselves facing layoffs at times of the year when the food service operation scales down. The government has inadvertently, I hope, ended up punishing people who work very hard on Parliament Hill every day that we are here and have done so, in numerous cases, for many years. These employees will be hurt by these changes.

So, too, will be a lot of very vulnerable persons, often single parents or women, who work in various seasonal sectors of the economy. It is important to remind ourselves that it is not the workers who are seasonal, it is the jobs in sectors of the economy. Up to 25% of Canada's GDP comes from seasonal industries, and it is not only fish processing in my riding, tourism operations or agricultural operations. I am talking about people who work for municipal governments, school boards and sectors of the economy from coast to coast to coast. In every community, there are people who will be hurt by these proposed changes.

[Translation]

There is no doubt: the people who will be hit the hardest by the cuts are the people who work in seasonal industries.

[English]

I received an email from a woman named Patricia Fraser who operates a mid-sized landscaping company on the outskirts of Moncton in a community called Indian Mountain. She hires 8 to 12 people every year. The company has been in business for almost 30 years. She does not see, with these proposed changes, how she will be able to keep these very hard-working women and men who year after year do a great job for her company and her clients. She will lose these workers. Her business is threatened. These very changes, Patricia Fraser tells me, will have a direct impact on a very important employer in an area of my riding where there, frankly, are not great employment opportunities.

As I mentioned in a question for the parliamentary secretary, it is a ridiculous idea that people can commute one hour to go to a job and one hour to return home from a place in rural New Brunswick.

Business of Supply

• (1120)

[*Translation*]

Basically, we are going to tell someone living in Richibouctou or in Saint-Louis-de-Kent, an hour from Moncton, that he will have to travel 105 km twice a day, on roads that are exceedingly dangerous in the winter, in order to take a job at a very modest wage, at minimum wage.

[*English*]

Many of the workers in my riding are making \$10, \$11 or \$12 an hour right now. They are not very well paid. If people do not to take a job at 70% of their wages or a job one hour away in Moncton, they will be punished and cut off employment insurance. For them, economically, they would be better off on provincial income assistance programs.

The government is effectively telling people that they will not have access to employment insurance because it will send them an email a couple of times a day about jobs. However, as my colleague from the NDP correctly noted, 20% to 30% of residents in rural Canada do not have access to the Internet or email capacity in their homes. The government is also cutting the community access centres where many people have been able to have access to the Internet. The failure of people to respond to an email about a job in a retail sector an hour away from where they live would lead to their employment insurance benefits being cut off. The consequences of that will be to empty communities in rural Canada.

[*Translation*]

One of my good friends, Dr. Donald Savoie, an expert in regional development and a professor with a Canada research chair at the Université de Moncton, clearly said that several rural and remote communities will die as a result of these changes.

[*English*]

Maybe the real objective of the government is to make life more difficult and complicated for the people in rural Nova Scotia, or on the outskirts of Newfoundland and Labrador or in rural New Brunswick, in my riding. Maybe it wants to complicate people's lives and the lives of their employers, the people who pay their wages, build businesses and hire people in very tentative and difficult economic circumstances. Maybe the government is telling these people that it is not worth it any more so they should pack up and leave.

The social consequences of those changes will be far-reaching and devastating.

In the small communities that I represent, most of the people who work as volunteer firefighters tend to be younger people, often with families, many of whom work in seasonal industries. These people will be forced to get an apartment in Halifax or move to other parts of the country. The government will say that it is not forcing people to move, but in employment law there is a notion of constructive dismissal. An employer does not actually need to tell an employee that he or she is fired. Rather, the employer can change the person's working circumstances, conditions of work or workplace climate to make it so toxic and so unacceptable that the person must leave his

or her job. In law, that is the same as calling the employee in and firing him or her. It is called constructive dismissal.

What the government is doing is constructive relocation. It will say that it is not forcing people to leave, but if people cannot find employment that allows them to pay their bills and look after their family, or if the small business they work for cannot get access to a qualified labour pool and, therefore, shuts down, the economic reality is that constructive relocation will take place and those people will leave those communities. We will not have volunteer firefighters who do fantastic work, not only fighting fires but in performing rescues in these communities.

• (1125)

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Madam Speaker, it is interesting that the Liberals like some of the initiatives we are taking and yet they are flip-flopping back and forth. In hearing them speak against this, I do not really understand what they like.

The NDP leader has said that one hour of travel is unreasonable under different personal circumstances. I live in a largely rural riding where a lot of seasonal jobs are available. Many people travel for longer than an hour just for those seasonal jobs. Therefore, it seems to us that it is reasonable.

Has the member ever visited an urban area where an hour-long commute is commonplace?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, yes, I have visited a place where there is an hour commute. I went to the University of Toronto, which is a great example of where people are forced into commutes that often exceed an hour.

Since the member says that he represents a rural riding, I am surprised he did not also include this in his question. An hour-long commute in Toronto may be 8 kilometres or 10 kilometres. It may also be on a public transit service that needs improvement but that still offers people an alternative.

In my riding, there is no public transit. Therefore, a one-hour commute is a 100-kilometre commute, with gas prices already at a level that represent a huge economic hardship, and on highways that are already very dangerous.

Maybe the member was not here when I said this, but the closest subway to my riding is in Boston. I have also been to Boston, in case the member is wondering.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Madam Speaker, I appreciate that my colleague talked about transportation because, as members know, I have one of the largest ridings in Canada. There is no public transportation to get from point A to point B and gas prices are extremely high. I also have seasonal workers in my area. There are a lot of firefighters. Some of them do find jobs in the meantime, but some of them are not able to find those jobs. If they need to have access to services, Service Canada offices are not in their areas.

Business of Supply

I wonder if the member would talk about the fact that the CAP funding was removed by the current government, was cut from libraries, and how that could have helped people get back to work.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, our colleague from Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking makes a very good point. The government, on the one hand, says that it wants to connect people with available jobs. Well, the instruments that may be used to do that would obviously be access to the Internet. The government has cut the funding for the community access program, which certainly, in many parts of rural Canada, was the only Internet access that people had. It has fired workers at Service Canada. It has cut some of the smaller rural offices, including those in my riding, where the front line staff at Service Canada were doing a great job in trying to help people. They were overworked and understaffed. Those people have in fact been laid off and removed from their jobs as well.

On top of that, in New Brunswick, the Minister of ACOA made an absolutely appalling announcement last week. All of the local economic development agencies, the Enterprise Network, are also being cut and abolished.

The government is cutting access to economic development, Internet and Service Canada offices. Basically, it is telling people to fend for themselves.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Madam Speaker, as my hon. friend from Beauséjour may be aware, the Green Party has put out a press release expressing a deep concern about the way this is going to go.

I will ask the member a hypothetical question because I do not think the Conservative Party recognizes the real-life experience of seasonal workers. If people are laid off from a job in a lumber mill but know they will be back in four months, they will be told to take another job somewhere else. If they get fired in that other job because they are not very good at it, they will lose benefits. Would that not be the case under this new scenario?

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Madam Speaker, our colleague again identifies one of the perverse consequences of these proposed changes. That is exactly what will happen. If people are unable, because of their skill level or their experience, to do a job that they are forced to take because they fear that their benefits will be cut off if they do not take it, and then they lose that job, through no fault of their own, the fact that they were terminated will mean that they will not have access to employment insurance benefits, and those people who had worked previously at a seasonal job may not be able to get that job back. It is a very unfortunate and complicated circumstance.

• (1130)

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I rise today to speak to the NDP motion with respect to what will happen with the changes to employment insurance.

For those who do not know, I represent the riding of Random—Burin—St. George's, which is predominantly a very rural riding. In fact, there are 180 communities in the riding, seven of which are isolated. That means one can only get to those communities by ferry. We all know that when we are dependent on the ocean and the winds and the weather with regard to getting back and forth, that can have a dramatic effect on whether people are able to get to work if they are

forced to take a job in a location that is an hour away. Some ferry rides are only 20 minutes, some are only 10 minutes, but there are things that impact on whether these ferries run.

I stand here to speak to the motion because I find it hard to believe a government that has MPs who represent rural ridings can still move forward with these changes without any consideration to the impact they will have, not only on people but also on the seasonal industries as well. Other colleagues have spoken earlier about this.

The impact of the government's proposals may very well put seasonal industries out of business because their employees will no longer be available to them. This has been mentioned before with regard to the tourism industry, the fishing industry. In municipalities, all of which depend on seasonal employees.

The problem we have is somehow the government is failing to recognize the contribution that seasonal industries make to the overall economy in an area and in a province.

Let me speak to tourism for a minute. If there are tourists flying into St. John's, Newfoundland, they will spend two or three days in the city, because it is a beautiful city. However, by and large, tourists come to Newfoundland and Labrador to visit the outports, as they are called, and rural areas of our province. The money they spend in those rural areas is really important to the overall economy of the province and is a lifeline for some of these rural communities.

We now are going to tell people that they have to move, that they have to take whatever job is available, whether it is an hour away or in a skill set similar to theirs. We are going to force people to take jobs for which they probably do not feel qualified, more than likely jobs that are so far away it means they will have to move away from their families.

That has always been a serious issue in Newfoundland and Labrador, but with the seasonal industries there, people have been able to work in their communities. Yes, some will go from one seasonal industry where the season may be short to other seasonal industries. Therefore, they will get more weeks of work than they would just working in one particular seasonal industry. The problem we are having with all of this is there is no consideration given to the impact this will have on families, particularly if they have to move away.

Do not get me wrong. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians are used to working away. They have to do it because they do not have a choice in a lot of cases, and they are very hard-working, industrious people. The fact that they have been going to Alberta time after time to try to provide for their families speaks volumes to their need to work and to their wish to work. To suggest in any way, shape, or form that people are on EI because they want to be on EI is far from the truth. People want to work, but sometimes they do not have a choice.

People will work in seasonal industries, but then they have to depend on employment insurance. We must not forget this is a program into which they have paid. This is not the government's money.

Business of Supply

•(1135)

Both the employees and the employers pay into the EI program. If the need is there for people to access this type of benefit, they need to be able to do that. Otherwise, we are telling them, yes, they can pay into a program that is supposed to be there for them if they need the benefit, but no, we are going to force them and suggest to them that they are going to have to drive an hour. In rural Newfoundland and Labrador, for some of those locations, an hour's drive might not be too bad in the summer, but we have to consider winter. Winter driving in Newfoundland and Labrador leaves a lot to be desired.

I wonder whether any of the Conservative MPs who represent rural ridings have spoken up about this and have discussed it with the minister and the Prime Minister. I cannot believe for a minute that those members are not hearing the same kind of backlash with respect to this decision as we are hearing from our constituents.

As an example, Burgeo is a community in my riding. From there, it is about a two-hour drive to get to either Stephenville or Corner Brook, where there might be jobs available. Will we now require that people drive over those treacherous roads? I say "treacherous" because we have a very large moose population. They will have to drive on those roads where so many accidents have happened and lives have been lost. Will we tell them to drive to work for two hours early in the morning and then at the end of the day back to Burgeo, in the dark, from either Stephenville or Corner Brook?

That does not make a lot of sense for a number of reasons. First is the cost and the wear and tear on their vehicle, if people have one because not everybody does. Then there is the price of gas and the issue of safety. It appears that none of these have been taken into account.

Another example is Harbour Breton in the Coast of Bays area. There are other communities around Harbour Breton, but none so close that people can hop in their car for 10 minutes to go to work. Harbour Breton is in an area where we have seen a revitalization of the fishery with respect to the aquaculture industry. In the aquaculture industry, there are seasonal employees. Not all are, but about 250 people in Harbour Breton are employed in the aquaculture industry. Those who are seasonal are trained, so they have a skill set. The company invests in those individuals so that when it needs them the following year, they are available, and the company does not have to start training over again. It is bothersome that none of this is being taken into account.

When people go down the path toward the impact this would have on individuals, it would appear that there has been no consultation whatsoever. It would appear that the government has not spoken to any of the people affected, certainly not to employers in the seasonal industries. It certainly has not considered at the impact this would have on those who work in seasonal jobs.

I have to repeat this. I cannot believe, for the life of me, that there are MPs on the Conservative side who would not understand and appreciate what this would mean to their constituents. If they have the same feedback we have had, it does not make sense that it is full steam ahead with no consultation.

We cannot forget it was only after considerable pressure by the opposition that we even received the details of the changes that were

to be put forward by the Conservatives with respect to EI. Not being upfront with those changes was unfair and was not the right thing to do. It took pressure from those who were concerned about those constituents to get the details so we could talk to the government about those and try to impress on it how important it was that it not go forward with this. This will have a devastating impact, particularly on rural communities and on the people who live in them.

•(1140)

The government has suggested that it will put the jobs that are available online. However, it plans to close CAP sites, which are one of the avenues people have to access this information. In Newfoundland and Labrador there were 147 CAP sites. In Random—Burin—St. George's alone there were 32. Those are what people use to get the information to find out if there are even jobs available. Now these—

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Questions and comments, the hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Madam Speaker, I listened carefully to the member for Random—Burin—St. George's and found her comments very interesting. I would like her to continue commenting on the question of employers and on the potential effect of the reforms on employers, businesses and workers in her riding.

[*English*]

Ms. Judy Foote: Madam Speaker, one of the serious concerns is the impact these changes will have on employers.

When we think of EI, we tend to think of people, the recipients of EI. We do not tend to think of those who will be impacted, those who actually hire those individuals, particularly in seasonal industries. This will have a serious impact on employers. If people are to be forced to take a job outside of the community, where the seasonal employers are in particular, that job will probably be for a longer period of time, and they will then not be available for the seasonal industry.

Again, there is the reality of the travel and the cost involved to both the employer and the employee.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Madam Speaker, I want to address a couple of comments that the member opposite had made.

First, I spent a significant amount of time in Atlantic Canada with the human resources committee as well as in provincial consultations. I can say from first-hand accounts that employers and employees in Newfoundland told us there were shortages and they needed people to work.

Second, she asked about a caucus member getting up to talk from a rural riding perspective. I represent a rural riding. There are many seasonal workers in my riding. Some work in apple orchards and some in our large tourism industry. We have the largest ski hill in Ontario at Blue Mountain. The employers there, and the employees, think these are the appropriate changes to make so that their businesses can grow and they can be employed.

Business of Supply

Let me correct something. The member mentioned a two-hour drive to somewhere. That is not in the regulations. She should please read them.

Does the member believe that having a job six months of the year, as opposed to a full-year, full-time job, is a better option for an individual?

Ms. Judy Foote: Madam Speaker, with respect to my colleague, she knows the answer to that. Everyone would prefer to have full-time employment. Newfoundlanders and Labradorians would prefer to have full-time employment.

The reality of the situation is that the members who applaud this live in areas where full-time employment is available. That is not the case in the area I represent, in rural Newfoundland and Labrador. To suggest there is any comparison at all between what happens in a riding in Ontario or in some other part of the country, that is not the case in Newfoundland and Labrador. We need to be more considerate of individuals who want to work but who just do not have the jobs available to them because of the time it would take to drive and because of the associated costs.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I am very glad the member from Newfoundland has made those comments. We have communities in Cape Breton that are in a similar situation.

I have an interesting point when the Conservatives talk about full-time employment. We have welders from Newfoundland and Cape Breton who weld pipelines in Alberta. There are shutdowns there due to weather conditions or permafrost. Are the Conservatives saying that these welders have to build condos in Toronto now? Where are they going to get the jobs? How are we going to make our economy in Canada prosper with the pipelines and other things if we do not have these people available to come back and forth to work?

• (1145)

Ms. Judy Foote: Madam Speaker, clearly, the member has a real appreciation for what these changes will mean. We live it day in and day out with our constituents. We know only too well what they are up against when they are expected to take on a job for which they are not qualified, the stress associated with that and with the salary probably being less than what they would make for a job in which they have a particular skill set. Then we expect them to move. It just does not make a lot of sense.

Again, it shows how out of touch the Conservative government is with Canadians from coast to coast to coast.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Madam Speaker, I would like to share my time with the member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord.

First I would like to say that I am proud the NDP has proposed this motion on employment insurance.

I find it sad that the government thinks that people who receive employment insurance are a bunch of lazy slackers. As the member for Madawaska—Restigouche put it so well, there are still people who prefer to receive employment insurance because they want to go hunting. That is how the Conservatives think.

The parliamentary secretary asked whether it was not better to have a job 12 months a year rather than six months a year.

Yes, it is much better.

The parliamentary secretary said she went to visit Newfoundland. I would like to know whom she spoke to in Newfoundland. Let her report to the House on whom she met in Newfoundland, because there is a fishing industry in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and the Gaspé.

If the Conservative government is so smart, I invite the Prime Minister to introduce a bill to melt the ice in Chaleur Bay so that people can fish in winter. If he is so smart, if he really believes in jobs 12 months a year and if he wants to support the fishing industry, I invite the Prime Minister to melt the ice in Chaleur Bay. That way, people could fish 12 months a year.

In addition, let him put some fish in the sea because this same government shut down the groundfish fishery. I invite the parliamentary secretary to come and tour New Brunswick. Let her come, and I will take her around to the employers who are having problems as a result of seasonal jobs: they want to keep their employees. However, the government's bill does the exact opposite. It wants those employees to go work elsewhere.

Industry back home in New Brunswick, and in the riding of Acadie—Bathurst, amounts to fishing and peat moss. Has anyone ever wondered how you harvest peat moss under the snow? This Conservative government is really out of touch with the reality of the regions to a ridiculous degree. The parliamentary secretary says she comes from a rural area. All right, but she may come from a rural area where there are secondary or tertiary processing jobs and employment 12 months a year.

If the Conservative government wants to do the right thing, let it put tools in place. Let the human resources minister put the tools in place for us to do the secondary and tertiary processing instead of sending all our fish to Japan.

Under these new regulations, unemployed workers are required to look for work twice a week. Some 3,000 people lose their jobs at the end of June because the fishery winds up in June and starts again in mid-August. The biggest surprise this government could have right now would be for fish plant employees to decide, twice a week, to go and see employers one hour's drive away about jobs those employers do not have. Employers would tell the Conservative government to get those workers off their backs because they would not be able to produce anymore with them coming to work in their yards when there are no jobs.

The government's parliamentary secretary said they were going to send unemployed workers job alerts twice a day to tell them where they could find work, but the problem that was raised is that some of them do not even have a computer. The government responded that 85% of people filing employment insurance claims did so online.

They file employment insurance claims online because the government requires them to do so. It has shut down human resources offices everywhere. There were more than 100 human resources offices in Canada, and since the Conservatives intend to close some of them, there will only be 22 left.

Business of Supply

• (1150)

Applying once for employment insurance means going to a neighbour and asking to use his computer. This happens once a year. But if a person has to ask to use his neighbour's computer twice a day to check jobs, the neighbour will get fed up.

The government is saying that if you want a job, you will have to use a computer to get it, because that is where the jobs are. Is the government telling us that it is going to send out two letters a day to Canadians to tell them that jobs are available? My goodness, I do not know what planet I am living on. If there are that many jobs in Acadie—Bathurst, I cannot wait to find out where they are. I am sure that the residents of Acadie—Bathurst cannot wait to know where all these jobs that the government is announcing are.

We are not against motherhood and apple pie, we are not against the fact that the government is telling people that there are going to be jobs available at specific locations. We are not against employers posting jobs or workers being available. The problem is telling somebody that if he does not go to a specific location for a job and accept it, his employment insurance will be cut off. If I were an employer, I would tell the government to mind its own business because it is not up to the government to dictate who should be in the private sector. If the government forces somebody to work for a particular employer and the person does not like the job, how productive will he be?

The 70% model sounds good, does it not? For those who get a job at 70% of their salary and are then laid off, will the next job be at 70% of that salary? Will it be 70% until the person receives the minimum wage? The government wants to help employers keep wages down. The government is going to play a role in forcing people to go and work for employers who will not increase wages. The Conservatives are going to make sure that people remain in poverty. That is what this measure is all about.

Furthermore, this measure is found in Bill C-38. Why did they not separate it from Bill C-38? They should let the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities conduct a real study. If the bill put forward by the minister and the federal Conservative government is so good, why is the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador not satisfied and why was it not consulted? Why is the Province of Nova Scotia not satisfied and why was it not consulted? Why is the Province of Prince Edward Island not satisfied and why was it not consulted?

The exception is New Brunswick, because we know that our premier, Mr. Alward, follows everything that the Prime Minister of Canada says. The Conservatives are in power in New Brunswick and they will not touch this with a 10-foot pole. The premier might have to answer for this in the next election in New Brunswick, because at the moment he does not represent the seasonal workers in our province.

The people in our province who work in the fisheries are wondering where they are expected to find a job. What will happen to the 60-year-old woman in Caraquet who has almost reached retirement age if she tries to take her car to work at a McDonald's in Bathurst with the winter road conditions that we have? By the way, it

is not funny when you drive along the coast. With the wind, even if there is not much snow falling, it becomes a storm. On the peatlands and in open country, the roads can be impassable just because of the winds. This is what they are doing; they are putting people's lives in danger.

The Conservatives think that people are happy to receive 55% of their salary and feel as though they are on vacation. They should see these people's living conditions and they should live in these conditions. They should answer the calls that I get in my office from people saying that they would like to work. They should remember the time when the fisheries were good and people worked 35 weeks per year. They worked 15- and 16-hour days, 7 days a week, for 35 weeks. I will never allow them to call our workers lazy slackers. These are the same people who leave our region to go work out west, where they can find jobs.

If the Conservative government wants to help people get jobs, it can help us get a better airport in Bathurst. The runway needs to be lengthened. It can give us a building that is capable of handling our people travelling up to the far north for jobs. This is the same government that cut \$18 million from ACOA and that gives us no tools. Tools are what we want. It is the government's responsibility to provide tools and to make it possible to get jobs, not to do what it is doing at the moment, cutting employment insurance so that people fall on hard times, sending them onto welfare and putting all the burden onto the provinces.

I hope that the Premier of New Brunswick is also listening to me; I hope he realizes that we, the taxpayers of New Brunswick, are the ones who are going to be paying for the federal government's mistakes—

• (1155)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member's speaking time is up.

For questions or comments, the hon. member for Mississauga South.

[*English*]

Mrs. Stella Ambler (Mississauga South, CPC): Madam Speaker, I ask the member opposite, why does the opposition insist on fearmongering about what these changes will do to seasonal workers? The fact is that in places of high unemployment where there are no jobs, EI will still be there for workers. It has been and always will be.

Why does the member refuse to read our measured and reasonable legislation as such? Why does he feel the need to scare workers?

Mr. Yvon Godin: Madam Speaker, I wish she would answer my question. I asked what the bill is all about, and the bill is all about cutting employment insurance for those who refuse a job. That is what people are afraid of.

If the member could get up and tell me that nobody would have their employment insurance cut because they refused a job, then good, but that is not what the bill says. It is not what the rule says.

Business of Supply

The rule in the bill says that if people do not take available jobs, they will lose their employment insurance. I do not think the member has read the bill or the rules it would put in place. That is the problem.

I do not know if the member has read the part in the bill that says a person could have to go an hour away to get to a job. If she had at least listened to what I said, it is about trying to get from Caraquet to Bathurst, which is an hour away, in the winter to go and work at McDonald's at minimum wage.

The member tells me that I am putting fear in workers; this is what puts fear in workers.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Madam Speaker, I thank my fellow New Brunswicker for his remarks. He has described the employment, economic and social conditions in his riding, which are much the same as those in several communities that I represent in this House.

I would like to ask the hon. member two very specific questions. At the start of his speech, he referred to the totally unacceptable comments made by the Minister of State for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency. The minister tells us that New Brunswick workers are lazy and that they prefer to stay on employment insurance and not work so that they have time for recreational activities during the winter. I find that to be complete nonsense. I ask the hon. member to expand on that.

In the same vein, this same minister, laughing in the face of his constituents, also cancelled the funding for the Enterprise agencies that form the local economic development network in New Brunswick, in his constituency and mine. In my opinion, this will make it harder to create jobs. Can the hon. member comment on that too?

Mr. Yvon Godin: Madam Speaker, I am going to answer the questions of the hon. member for Beauséjour regarding the fact that some people prefer to take advantage of the EI program to go hunting. Imagine. I do not know whether the hon. member likes to hunt, but I do know that the Minister of National Defence goes fishing and uses a government helicopter to pick him up on the shore. The Conservatives do that.

If they want to slash spending, they could begin there. They have earned that reputation. A minister travels to England or to another country and uses a big limousine at a cost of \$3,500.

People back home are hard workers. The Minister of State for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and member for Madawaska—Restigouche should remember that, in 1993, under the government of Brian Mulroney, there were only two Conservatives left in the House because that government had begun cutting back on the EI program.

Now that he is the minister responsible for ACOA, he should provide the regions with economic development tools, to give people an opportunity to find work. Instead, he is cutting \$18 million. He is slashing funding for agencies such as the community economic development agencies in all the regions of New Brunswick, including Enterprise Peninsula, Enterprise Chaleur, Enterprise Restigouche, and everywhere.

Instead of uttering such nonsense, the minister should help the region, and he should be proud of it. He should say that he was elected to defend the interests of his region in Ottawa, instead of insulting it, but that is what he is doing: he is insulting our region.

He is the minister responsible for La Francophonie, but he is not even able to state our case regarding Supreme Court judges and the Auditor General of Canada. He does none of that. Last week, people in his riding told me that they were ashamed of their MP and that they regretted electing him. They had forgotten what happened in the late 1980s. Now, they see what he is doing. There are seasonal workers in Madawaska too. The minister is also calling them lazy, and that is unacceptable. What the minister did last week is unacceptable.

● (1200)

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Acadie—Bathurst for drawing our attention to seasonal industry. What we are talking about is the economy. This is an industry. It is a fact of life in our regions. This far-reaching change to employment insurance is going to destroy that industry. The harm has already begun.

This is a fact of life in our regions. There are people who are starting to leave because they know they will not be able to stay there; their plans for the future for their regions will simply be dead in the water. They want to make a go of it.

Since being elected as the member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, I have tried repeatedly, as have many people in my riding, to communicate with the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development so we could meet with her and explain how things are in our region. Things on the upper north shore and in Charlevoix are not the same as they are in Quebec City or Montreal or Toronto or Calgary. Things are different. We wanted to talk to her about our concerns about employment insurance well before this plan to destroy it.

We tried to contact the minister by mail, by email and by telephone. We planned a meeting with her assistant. The result was a telephone meeting that was quite simply quickly forgotten and gave the impression that it was simply to stall for time.

I am more concerned than ever for the people of my riding, for the families who live on the upper north shore and in Charlevoix. Does the government realize it is causing an exodus from those regions?

I was talking with someone from Les Escoumins. She told me that when she went to get a coffee at the convenience store, the cashier told her that six people that day had let her know they were leaving the region to go and work in Sept-Îles, a city more than 100 km from Forestville or Les Escoumins.

Is this how the Conservatives deal with all the issues before them? Do they always go it alone? Do they always run the country as they like, with no consultation, without meeting with the people who are directly affected by this measure? Has the minister ever once set foot in Charlevoix? Has she ever gone to the upper north shore? Yes, Charlevoix and the upper north shore look nice on a postcard, but the people who live there see the landscape in a whole different way.

Business of Supply

The government has to stop playing with numbers, because at this point its calculations are pitiful. It is not taking into consideration the regional economy, the reality of the lives of these people who are developing economies after the losses in the forestry industry and a declining tourism industry. The people are making plans and developing an economy so they can make a go of it.

I have a list of people I have met with on this issue. A lot of them would like to meet with the minister to explain the situation to her. We are prepared to cover her costs. We want her to meet with people. That is one of the duties of a minister and a member. We want the minister to come to us, but perhaps not in an F-35.

The Conservatives have completely lost touch with their human side. All that matters is their cronies and big business. That is all that counts.

There is another resident in my riding who works for an extermination company. There are very few bugs from January to March. There are not many insects. With three children at home, this resident needs money. What should he do? Go and work for a competitor? The competitors have no more jobs to offer than anyone else. Going to work for a competitor will mean that he will have to leave his employer. If an employee wants to climb the ladder in the business, he has to be able to trust his employer, and this trust has to be reciprocated by the employer.

• (1205)

Clearly, many sectors of our economy in the regions are seasonal, and there is not enough work in the winter to cover this period of the year where people are on employment insurance.

The Conservative government has climbed into bed with management and the rich and is abandoning workers. The government lacks an overall vision when it comes to the regions. It should trust the elected representatives who represent that segment of the population. I thought that that was something that the current Prime Minister wanted to achieve at one point, by giving more power to members.

Actions speak louder than words. Are we to conclude that the Conservative government is trying to divide the regions, to divide east and west? In eastern Canada, the sectors of economic activity in many municipalities are seasonal. The government is attacking the resource regions, which inevitably have to contend with work cycles. I would really like to know what regions the Conservatives were referring to when they said that they wanted to give the regions power.

To give you a better idea, here is what is really happening in Charlevoix. I have before me a regional overview prepared by the Charlevoix Mouvement Action-Chômage. For several years, the Charlevoix economy has been in bad shape. The population is not well educated, over 40% of the residents have no high school diploma; the employment rate is anemic, unemployment is verging on 15%; and the average person's income barely exceeds \$21,000.

Charlevoix's economy is based mainly on tourism. Unemployment of varying duration is a fact of life for many households in the region. Wages are low. A benefit rate of 55% of gross earnings leaves seasonal workers in an unstable financial position. Being dependent on weather and tourism, the economy is vulnerable and

people are increasingly concerned. The number of hours required to qualify for employment insurance has increased from 420 to 560. That is troubling, particularly when you know that work lasts 12 to 14 weeks for some people. When they do manage to qualify, benefits are not paid long enough for them to make ends meet for the year. There is a black hole. Some people cannot find work in winter because there is not enough for everyone. The economy they want to create there is not established. They need an economic safety net, a social safety net, to proceed with their projects. Some people in the region may go 14 weeks without any income, even if they have children, a house to pay for and grocery bills.

Transitional measures were introduced in 2000. Why were they introduced? Because the map drawn for the purpose of calculating rates did not reflect the actual situation in all the regions. The map has not been redrawn. Since then, pilot projects of all kinds have been introduced across the region. Is that not an indication that the act is ineffective?

Action-Chômage also briefed me, but I am going to go to my conclusion, since I only have a minute of speaking time left.

The following appears on the Service Canada website concerning employment insurance: "The plan is financed by premiums collected from workers and employers. The accumulated funds cover both the benefits paid to unemployed persons and the costs of administration."

Why do budget cuts have to be made to a program that is self-funded? Someone explain that to me. It seems to me, and to many others, that this bank should be highly effective in meeting workers' needs.

Is the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development familiar with the difficulties caused by a tight family budget? I may not be an eminent lawyer or a learned political scientist, but I have personally experienced that situation.

• (1210)

Once I was told at the employment insurance office that if I had been there a week earlier, I would have been eligible for benefits but that, as it was, I was short nine hours. I spent three months without any income, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I believe the minister should listen to the members in this House, who can teach her a great deal and explain the realities of our regions.

[English]

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, coming from a rural riding in British Columbia near the Rocky Mountains, I know that rural living is a way of life for a lot of people. They accept that by living in remote areas, there are handicaps with getting in and out. With regard to part-time work, whether it be in the ski or golf industries, a lot of people accept and understand that when those seasons are over, they get jobs in other areas not that far away, recognizing that they enjoy rural living. That is part of the sacrifice.

Business of Supply

Would he agree that for a lot of people who want to find jobs after their seasonal jobs are over—for instance, the ski industry—a one-hour drive to a secondary job is not that much of a hardship, especially if the exception is that they like living in a rural setting?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay: Mr. Speaker, that is not the reality for many regions. That demonstrates ignorance about a lot of regions. In many places, you need to travel more than 100 km to find a job. From one end to the other of the Upper North Shore is at least 100 km. The same goes for the whole territory. People who live in Sacré-Coeur cannot move to Forestville because there is no work in Forestville. They have to travel even farther, to Baie-Comeau or Sept-Îles. The same goes for Saguenay. So it is simply false.

If the objective is to force people to go somewhere to work, under the pretext that some of them just want to sit back and take advantage of EI, we are not going to help them by destroying employment insurance. We know the carrot-and-stick approach, but we are not going to encourage people to go to work by using a sledgehammer instead of a stick; we have to use the carrot instead.

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the hon. member for his very interesting remarks. He also talked about his life experience. That was very interesting.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin: I apologize, I sometimes hear the hon. members in the background and I lose my train of thought.

The hon. member mentioned an organization from his region that works on unemployment. Those organizations are very close to the reality of our constituents. The hon. member wanted to go into more detail, but he did not have time, unfortunately. I would like to hear what he has to say on this subject.

• (1215)

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay: Mr. Speaker, the economic reality in the Upper North Shore is that the major industry was forest related. The people of the Upper North Shore are now developing economic activities in tourism, ecotourism and biomass. Many projects are underway.

At the moment, however, people are leaving the Upper North Shore and surrounding areas. They were already experiencing problems in accessing employment insurance because the government had put an end to the transitional measures. What is happening now is worse still. It will become even more difficult for people to collect employment insurance and their income will drop in winter. The fact is that they need this social safety net, and they need time for their economy to be restructured.

What is happening at the moment is the destruction of the economy in these regions.

[*English*]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my Conservative colleague from Kootenay—Columbia asked a question and mentioned something very important, the fact that many people work in two different industries. They may go from ski hill work to golf course work. However, there are periods in between

that must be meshed together with some type of income support, which is the EI system. What is going to happen through this legislation is that those skilled workers are going to be chased out of two different industries now, ski hill operation and golf course operation. It is obvious the government does not understand the nature of seasonal work.

Could my colleague expand on the fact that there are not a lot of forest fires in northern Manitoba in December, there is not a lot of halibut caught in January and there are not a lot of potatoes picked in P.E.I. in February? Most people who go on vacation in March go south and so the tourism industry is down too. Could he expand a bit more on the nature of seasonal industries in this country and their importance?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my Liberal Party colleague for his question.

The fact is that there are many specialized jobs in certain fields. There is a risk that these people will leave their regions because of the serious economic downturn. There will be job losses. It will become a vicious cycle.

Entrepreneurs who have skilled employees will have to replace them with people who do not have the necessary skills. They will have to train them. This will represent costs for companies. It will destroy the seasonal industries because they are genuine industries. These are not people taking advantage of a situation.

[*English*]

Mr. Merv Tweed (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar.

Our government cannot support a motion that is factually incorrect. The changes we are introducing would ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not.

By accepting a reasonable job under the new definition, Canadians would actually increase their income from what they were collecting on EI, and in many cases that increase would be substantial. That is why our government is investing in connecting Canadians with jobs in their local labour markets.

These fair and reasonable measures announced a week ago today by my hon. colleague the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development would help Canadians return to work more quickly. This would help address the growing skills and labour shortage in Canada by helping Canadians who want to work get back to work. These are necessary changes to ensure the EI program is working more effectively for Canada and for Canadians.

Thanks to the strong leadership of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance our economy has created 750,000 net new jobs since the end of the recession.

At the same time, we recognize that there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work, particularly in the off-season in parts of the country where much of the economy is based on seasonal industries. Our government is committed to helping these Canadians find jobs they are qualified for in their local labour markets.

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But for those individuals who live in areas of high unemployment and are unable to find jobs, the employment insurance system will be there for them, as it always has been.

These EI improvements are only the most recent in a series of economic action plan measures we have introduced to support jobs, growth and economic development. One of the programs that helped us achieve this economic success is the work-sharing program. I have had experience with that in a previous life, in my business experience. It has made a difference to both employees and employers alike in helping them survive the ups and downs of economic recovery.

Through the economic action plan, the Conservative government made the work-sharing program more accessible and extended its duration to help minimize the effects of the economic downturn on Canadian companies and their employees.

Since February 2009, more than 300,000 Canadians have benefited from the work-sharing program under the more than 11,000 agreements signed with employers.

How does it work? Work-sharing helps businesses avoid temporary layoffs when facing a reduction in the normal level of activity that is beyond their control. A good example would be manufacturing jobs, where economic slowdowns mean orders dry up unexpectedly. If workers agree to a reduced work week while their employer recovers, they may receive EI benefits, effectively allowing two or three workers to share one job but to still have their job.

Employers are able to retain their skilled employees and avoid the costly process of recruiting and training new employees when businesses return to normal levels. Employees keep their jobs and maintain their skills, all the while supplementing their wages with EI benefits for the days they are not working. They have helped their employer stay in business and stay open in the community, and they have not had to sacrifice their take-home pay.

This is the type of well-functioning program Canadians have come to expect from this government and it is a win-win for everyone involved.

Unlike the divisive politics of members opposite who try to pit one region of Canada against another, our government believes in programs, such as the work-sharing program, that are equally available everywhere in Canada, and that is important to note.

There are plenty of success stories that highlight how effective this program is, and if I may, I will share a couple.

Mascot Truck Parts, based in Ontario, was founded in 1936. The company has evolved over the past seven decades to become one of the largest heavy-duty specialists in North America, applying its expertise to rebuilding all makes of transmissions, differentials and steering gears.

The economic downturn hit the manufacturing and automotive industry hard and this had a major impact on Mascot. To avoid layoffs and keep the business running, the company signed a work-sharing agreement that began in August 2009 and ended in July 2010. It allowed Mascot Truck Parts to keep 107 employees and avoid laying anyone off when it was affected by the downturn.

● (1220)

In Alberta, there is a 475-person company called Standen's Limited that benefited from a work-sharing agreement between March 2009 and May 2010. The company manufactures heat-treated alloy steel products, such as leaf springs, tillage tools, trailer axles and other speciality products used for heavy-duty agriculture, transportation and light military vehicle applications.

The business exports internationally to the U.S., South America, Australia, New Zealand and China. When the downturn started to affect its bottom line, Standen's was able to keep its original staff on the payroll. Thanks to work-sharing, the business was staffed up, ready to roll when product demand resumed.

I have given two concrete examples of an effective EI program that works. The measures we introduced to support job growth and economic recovery have given us the strongest job growth numbers in the G8, something we should all be very proud of.

As Canada continues to move out of the recession, the Canadian labour market is shifting from one where we needed programs like work-sharing to one where there is a skills and labour shortage. With this evolution, our government is removing the disincentives to work that exist within the EI system to ensure we can match Canadians with available jobs in their local labour markets that are appropriate to their skill sets.

The communities I live in and represent in Brandon—Souris, Manitoba, are right now exemplifying exactly what is happening. We have a high demand for skilled labour, and unfortunately those people are not available within our region. I am not saying people should have to move, but if they choose to, Brandon—Souris is a great place to come and live, and the job opportunities are plenty. I would compare the lifestyle to any other part of Canada.

In closing, I urge my hon. colleagues to support our measured and reasonable changes to the employment insurance system. It is for this reason that I cannot support the opposition motion today.

● (1225)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not know why the government is attacking workers.

Maybe the member could explain it to us. When people are out there fishing and can only work so many months, a lot of them do in fact go out and find another job in the interim. Then they go back to being able to fish, and we do need that because our economy relies on the fishing industry, just as our economy is impacted by forest fires and we need to have those forest fires put out by firefighters.

I am just trying to make some sense of this, and maybe the member could explain this to me. If these seasonal workers are forced to take, and I am saying "forced to take", these lower-paying jobs, will they be able to return to their previous employment, or will they be punished for that?

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Mr. Merv Tweed: Mr. Speaker, every part of Canada is different. Every part of Canada has different circumstances.

We have said very clearly that in situations where there is no opportunity to find that second job or that interim job, the employment insurance program will be there.

Unlike that member across the floor, we as a government will not tell people where they have to go and work. We will not tell people; we will simply make it available to the employers and employees that these opportunities exist. We would encourage them to fulfill that and take advantage of it.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in that attempt to let Canadians know, the government has spent \$21 million in developing a program whereby it emails information about potential jobs to those who are receiving EI benefits.

It may reach a fair number of EI recipients. However, the fact is that 40% of households that make less than \$30,000 a year have no access to the Internet. In that bracket between \$30,000 a year and \$50,000 a year, the rate is about 25% of households that have no access to Internet. What is the plan to reach those potential users? I would think many of those households would be the clients the government wants to reach with this program.

Mr. Merv Tweed: Mr. Speaker, the bottom line is that if people want a job or are looking for one, there are several avenues they can take. In today's world, technology is not just the Internet. We have phones. We can access information through many sources, and we do.

The challenge from the government is to make sure as many of those sources have that information, so when people are looking for employment or people are looking for employees, they can access a pool that would tell them where these people are and provide them with the opportunity.

As a former self-employed person who employed many people, if I wanted to find somebody in this country to work for me, I would not hesitate to go out and find them. That is what we need people to do. And we need people who want to work to have access to that pool, as well.

Mr. Joe Daniel (Don Valley East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. colleague his speech. I feel the member has spoken well before us on this issue.

However, I do have one thing I have difficulty with; that is, why the members opposite have such an issue with these changes to the EI system that would connect Canadians with available work and allow them to make more money in the process than if they remained on EI.

Would the hon. colleague please provide some thoughts on this?

• (1230)

Mr. Merv Tweed: Mr. Speaker, I can relate an experience as recently as last week in my community.

I met an employer who is looking for heavy-duty welders. He came up to me and said, "What a great idea. Now I can actually have a pool that I can apply to, to find the qualified person who has the qualities I want in my job and at least have the opportunity to present my offer to him". Before, they never had that. Also, "I'm an

unemployed person with those qualities. I also have access to that same pool to put my name forward and put it out into the job market."

I cannot think of a better way for people to connect and a better way to create an opportunity for people to get jobs.

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise today to share my thoughts on this NDP motion. I do not believe it will come as any surprise to the House to hear that I cannot support a factually incorrect and inaccurate motion.

Let me be clear on what our changes would do.

We would connect out-of-work Canadians with local jobs in their local communities within their skill set. The changes we would be making are common-sense adjustments to ensure that EI is not discouraging people from trying to get back into the job market. As we face unprecedented labour and skills shortages, it is important that the employment insurance program is working most effectively for Canada and Canadians. That is why budget 2012 announced revisions to the working while on claim pilot project. This national pilot project would ensure that Canadians who are collecting EI benefit from accepting all available work.

Previously, only a portion of earnings were exempt from being clawed back. Once earnings exceeded this exemption, EI benefits were clawed back dollar for dollar.

The practical result of this policy is not hard to see: EI claimants turning down any work that exceeded this exemption because they would not profit from their labour.

While an individual is waiting for a permanent, full-time job to open up, their skills are underutilized. Under this new pilot, we would cut the current clawback rate in half and apply it to all earnings made while on claim.

We know from experience that part-time work will often lead to full-time work. This project would ensure that EI claimants always benefit from accepting work because it would allow them to keep more of what they earn while on EI.

Let me use an example to illustrate how an EI claimant would benefit from this new working while on claim pilot project.

Imagine William, a retail salesperson, who has been laid off and is receiving EI benefits of \$450 per week. He has found part-time work in a store that pays him a total of \$600 per week. Under the current working while on claim pilot project, William can earn wages equivalent to 40% of his weekly EI benefits with no reduction to those benefits. This allows him to keep \$180. Earnings above the 40% level reduce his benefit payment dollar for dollar, so William's combined earnings and EI benefits are \$630.

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Under the new working while on claim pilot project, William's EI benefits would only be reduced by 50% of his earnings from working while he is on claim. His combined weekly income would then be \$750. We believe it should pay to work. With this new pilot, it would always be more beneficial for claimants to accept work than to receive EI alone.

We know the job market varies from region to region. We know that some seasonal workers, especially in rural areas, may not be able to find other work in the off season. The Prime Minister has been crystal clear. Our government is working to help these Canadians find jobs in their local area appropriate to their qualifications. For those who are unable to find employment, employment insurance will be there for them as it always has been. However, in areas where there are more jobs than unemployed Canadians, it makes no sense for EI claimants to stay at home when there are jobs they could be doing.

As announced in economic action plan 2012, we are introducing a new permanent national approach to better align the calculation of the weekly amount an EI claimant receives with their regional labour market conditions.

As of April of next year, subject to Parliament's approval, the amount a claimant receives weekly will be determined using an average of his or her best weeks of employment. In higher unemployment regions, fewer best weeks will be used in this calculation, making it more beneficial for workers to accept all available work in slower seasons of employment.

• (1235)

By replacing the previous selective pilot with a national program, we would ensure that those living in regions with similar labour market conditions receive similar benefits.

These are two great examples of improvements our government is making to employment insurance to ensure Canadians are always better off accepting all available work. Matching Canadian workers with available jobs in their local area is critical to supporting economic growth and productivity as well as quality life for Canadians.

Our country's economic performance continues to be strong. From July 2009 to April 2012 more than 750,000 jobs have been created. These gains in job creation along with the further rise in business confidence bode well for continuing economic growth. We need to maintain that momentum. We have a strange dichotomy in this country where some regions that have high unemployment rates also have labour and skills shortages. While the unemployment rate in my province of Saskatchewan is 4.9%, there is 18% unemployment in northern Saskatchewan. Mining companies are begging for workers because they cannot find Canadians to fill those job shortages.

The Canada Job Vacancy Survey of Statistics Canada's tells us that about 250,000 jobs went unfilled in the fall of last year. We need to ensure that the EI program contributes to economic growth by encouraging people to fill those available jobs. That is good for them, for their families, for their communities and the economy at large.

Let me briefly outline a few of the other measures that are part of our plan. We would be investing \$21 million over two years to help unemployed Canadians to find jobs more quickly. We would offer more labour market information to claimants to support their job searches, including expanded online job postings. This would include daily emails with jobs that are specific to EI claimants, based on geography and the skills a worker possesses. We would also ensure that employers consider Canadians before they hire temporary foreign workers.

While the opposition NDP prefers to attack hard-working Canadians who go to work every day filling crucial roles, we want to better connect Canadians with available jobs. Under our plan Canadians would always benefit financially from accepting suitable employment.

Our government's top priority is creating jobs and long-term prosperity for Canadians. That is why we are making these practical, common sense changes to connect out-of-work Canadians with jobs in their local areas. I urge all members to support our government's initiatives and to vote against this factually incorrect opposition motion.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to be able to stand in the House today to ask my colleague on the other side of the House a question.

We have different positions on what we would like and not like to see with respect to employment insurance. Unfortunately, I do not share my colleague's position, but what intrigues me about what is happening is the process itself. The Conservatives never mentioned during the election campaign that changes would be made to employment insurance.

Were there consultations? Did they meet people and employers in the provinces? Did they meet workers to ask them whether the changes they were proposing were useful and whether they agreed with them on this matter?

• (1240)

[*English*]

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Speaker, it has been stated many times since these measures were introduced that we are facing an unprecedented labour and skills shortage. We have heard from employers. We have heard from many individuals back home in my riding that we need to better connect Canadians with the jobs that are available.

These are common sense and reasonable changes that are in the best interests of Canadians and our economy. I would encourage the hon. member to look past the fearmongering her own party is doing and support what we are doing in these measures.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question is on how the government would administer these regulations. I will give my colleague an opportunity to get her thoughts together on that while I share a reality.

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The minister appeared yesterday and one of the comments was that there are currently 180,000 EI claims that have gone over 29 days. They went 29 days without a cheque in receiving their entitled EI. There were 180,000 Canadians who found themselves there.

The government has carved the guts out of the capacity to deal with EI claims and claims processing. With these additional regulations, obviously it would be a more rigorous procedure. Would there be additional resources?

The \$21 million is really being put into the software program. How are we going to deal with this?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Speaker, current EI rules already require that Canadians actively look for work while collecting EI. We know that there are processes currently in place to handle current claims that are already being processed through EI.

The changes we are introducing would further enhance those requirements, including providing Canadians with additional guidance on how to search for jobs in their local area within their skill set. This would include enhanced job alerts and better labour market information. We expect that by providing that proactive information to Canadians, the ability to manage claims would be there as they need it.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member spoke about these unprecedented skills and labour shortages. In my riding of Simcoe—Grey, we have these challenges. It is a rural riding. I know that the opposition like to refute that anyone from a rural riding supports these measures, but I can say that I strongly support them and I am from a rural riding, as are the employers and employees in my riding.

Could the member please address this issue and why these changes would help individuals find jobs, connect Canadians with jobs, in this area where we need to find as many skilled workers as possible in rural as well as urban Canadian centres?

Mrs. Kelly Block: Mr. Speaker, we have been very clear that our government's top priority is the economy. We are proud to have seen 750,000 jobs created since the end of the economic recession. Our government is working to help these Canadians find jobs in their local area appropriate to their qualifications.

As I mentioned, I am from one of those provinces that is working to address these unprecedented skilled labour shortages and the need to fill jobs in other parts of our province. These measures would help us to do that. These measures would help us to connect Canadians with the jobs that are available.

• (1245)

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Hochelaga.

My perspective on this motion is a Newfoundland and Labrador perspective. In that light, I begin.

First it was the fishery, and now it is the fishermen. That will be a theme throughout my speech.

First the fishery was destroyed. Under consecutive federal Liberal and Conservative governments, groundfish stocks, such as cod and

flounder, were practically wiped off the face of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. There has been an embarrassing lack of recovery; in fact, there are no plans for a recovery. The Conservatives voted against that bill, my bill, the Newfoundland and Labrador rebuilding bill, last fall.

It has been 20 years since the biggest layoff in Canadian history, the shutdown of the northern cod fishery. It was comparable to the Prairie dust bowl of the 1930s, and the anniversary is coming up on July 2. Members should mark that on their calendars.

There has been no recovery and there is no recovery plan. First our fishery was abandoned, and now our fishermen and our mariners are being abandoned. They are being systematically abandoned. The latest blow comes from the proposed changes to employment insurance. These changes, as I said Wednesday during question period, will empty what is left of rural Newfoundland and Labrador, what we call the outports. First the fishery, now the fishermen.

Today's motion calls on the Conservative government to abandon plans to restrict access to employment insurance for Canadian workers who have followed the rules and who will now be forced to choose between taking a pay cut of up to 30% or losing their employment insurance benefits.

These changes amount to an attack on seasonal workers. The Conservative government is telling frequent EI claimants that they will be required, after six weeks of collecting benefits, to take any work available within a one-hour commute, providing it pays at least 70% of what they were making before they were laid off.

Tell me that will not hurt. It means two hours of commuting for a job that pays 30% less and that probably requires daycare expenses and fuel expenses. There are no subways in Newfoundland and Labrador. That may be news to the out-of-touch Conservative government. That is 30% less pay, with increased expenses.

In very many rural areas there is little other work besides seasonal industries like fishing, forestry and tourism. That is a reality. Most seasonal workers would be classified as frequent claimants. There was a point in time a few decades ago when the fishery employed fishermen and plant workers full time, year round, 52 weeks a year. That gets back to my point about the fishery being destroyed under consecutive Conservative and Liberal governments and the need for an inquiry.

Instead of changing EI rules, the Conservative government should come up with a rebuilding plan for fish stocks off Newfoundland and Labrador. That would get my people back to full-time work. How is that for a novel idea to get Canadians back to work?

The Conservative changes to EI punish frequent EI claimants. They punish seasonal workers. According to the *St. John's Telegram*, the daily newspaper in my riding, Newfoundland and Labrador is the province with the single highest number of frequent EI claimants. Of 67,700 claimants in Newfoundland and Labrador, almost 54,000 could be classified as frequent, meaning nearly 80% of my province's EI claimants would fall into the frequent category. Nationally, the average is 32%. That is a big spread. In effect, the changes to EI could have a disproportionately larger impact on my province than on other provinces.

That would hold true also with changes to old age security and GIS. More Newfoundlanders and Labradorians depend on their government pensions as their main source of income, because many seasonal industries do not come with pension plans. That is a reality of life too.

• (1250)

First it was the fishery; now it is the fishermen.

In so many areas of Atlantic Canada, there is only seasonal work. It is the nature of the industry—well, ever since the fishery was destroyed under the Liberal and Conservative watch, again.

The changes to EI amount to a race to the bottom. Let us take, for example, a seasonal worker in outport Newfoundland who finds a job that pays 70% of what he or she made in the fish plant. That would have to be near or at minimum wage, which a person, let alone a family, cannot be expected to survive on. On top of that, there are the added expenses I mentioned earlier: daycare, fuel, that sort of thing. I repeat: it is a race to the bottom. More people would probably draw from provincial welfare just to get by, placing a larger fiscal burden on the provinces.

I will summarize the Conservative plan for Atlantic Canada for outport Newfoundland and Labrador.

First, walk away from the fish and pretend that the stocks never existed, with no recovery plan and no rebuilding targets. The same goes for the Conservative pretense of supporting the seal harvest.

Second, abandon the fishermen. Examples of that would include the potential elimination of owner-operator fleet separation policies, which would essentially kill the traditional inshore fishery. Another example is the steady deterioration of search and rescue services, although the Conservatives are spreading a vicious rumour that the Italians are actually picking up the slack on marine medical calls. Another is the cuts to ACOA, which mean regional development boards are basically on their way out, as is any presence of the federal Department Fisheries and Oceans following continuous cuts to science and management.

First it was the fish, and now it is the fishermen. Where is the consultation? The Conservatives have a habit of pulling legislation out of the air and ramming it down the throats of Canadians. We see it as they raise the age of eligibility for old age security from 65 to 67. There was no talk of that during the last federal election. That has

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made people scared. There was no talk of these EI changes either. In fact, there was no consultation with Canadians, period.

Elizabeth Beale is the president of the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council. She states:

These are important policy changes and we need a full policy discussion.

Good luck with that, I say. It will not happen with this Conservative government.

Beale makes another great point. She says:

What's being missed in this discussion and missed in the national dialogue is the inference that Atlantic Canadians don't want to work.

Members will recognize that idea, the idea that unemployment rates are high and therefore Atlantic Canadians want to stay home and twiddle their fingers, but as Beale said,

The reality is completely different.

We need to keep in mind that the Prime Minister has said Atlantic Canada has "a culture of defeat". That quote still rings in the ears of Atlantic Canadians.

The changes to EI would reduce the incomes of people in rural communities who are older and unable to take jobs elsewhere. That is a fact. That is the reality.

Kathy Dunderdale, Premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, has said:

There seems to be a real disconnect between what the federal government is trying to achieve and the reality of people's lives in rural parts of the country—particularly here in Newfoundland and Labrador.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, much of our rural areas are dependent on the fishery—what is left of it—and tourism. Both are seasonal, so these changes would hurt economically sensitive areas.

First it was the fishery, and now it is the fishermen.

It would seem to me that the time of the Conservative government would be better spent in implementing a rebuilding plan for the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. It would seem to me that the time of the Conservative government would be better spent in dropping plans to eliminate the owner-operator fleet separation policies. It would seem to me that the time of the Conservative government would be better spent giving people hope for the future, hope for our culture and heritage—hope, not punishment on top of punishment.

Years ago the Prime Minister said that Atlantic Canada has a culture of defeat, but it is the Conservatives who are defeatist toward us. They are defeatist, out of touch, and out of luck come the next election.

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●(1255)

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was listening to my colleague, who talked about people travelling two hours, so I am making an assumption that he means one hour to work and one hour back home.

I live in a rural riding. There are people in my riding who actually drive for an hour to get to work and drive an hour to get home. There are no subways or public transportation for those individuals to get to those jobs.

I am wondering how difficult that might be, since the NDP says people cannot go to work by travelling for an hour.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, it is one hour to get to work and one hour to get home. Then there are added expenses on top of that, such as daycare, fuel, car maintenance and the whole nine yards. We also have to keep in mind—give me a chance to speak, now—that those people will be making 30% less while having extra expenses.

That is your plan for the future of rural Newfoundland and Labrador and rural Canada. It is out of touch.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Before I continue with questions and comments, I would remind all hon. members, now that this has happened two or three times this morning, that questions and comments ought to be directed to the Chair rather than colleagues. I would like people to keep that in mind. It maintains a certain level of decorum in the debate.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to ask my colleague from St. John's South—Mount Pearl this question. We understand that the government is heading down the road of getting rid of the owner-operator fleet separation policy that now exists, which enables small owner-operator fishermen to work in communities throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and throughout Atlantic Canada. It is going to get rid of that policy.

Does the member not see that the drive to cut EI benefits in those same communities that support seasonal fishermen is not part of the plan of the Conservative government to turn over the fishery to corporate Canada and drive working people out of Newfoundland and Labrador and coastal Canada?

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour for the excellent question. He is doing an excellent job as the critic for fisheries and oceans.

In terms of the big picture, the hon. member is dead on the money. The potential elimination of owner-operator fleet separation policies would kill the traditional inshore fishery. I believe the changes to employment insurance will drive rural Canadians in Newfoundland and Labrador and in Atlantic Canada out of those areas. If we look at it from the perspective of the big picture, it is a plan by the Conservative government to do away with what is left of the traditional fisheries in Atlantic Canada.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my hon. colleague from St. John's South—Mount Pearl for a very clear description of the different worlds that exist within one country. Canada is one country, and we all love it. I

am grateful that yesterday the hon. member for Calgary Centre reminded us of that.

I hear Conservative members of Parliament talk about how employees are not looking hard enough for work, even though we know that they do. However, I want to focus the question on the employers.

In seasonal industries, the employers have benefited from EI. They need the system. It can be fixed, it can be tweaked, and things can be done, but essentially, when employers lay off employees at the end of a summer season, whether the employers are in fisheries, forestry, tourism or mining, they want to know those people are willing to come back to them for the same jobs they held before they were laid off.

This is an employer benefit, and I am going to ask the hon. member if he thinks the government has given sufficient concern to employers' dependence on this system.

●(1300)

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, that is a good question. I have spoken with employers since these proposed changes were announced, and employers in seasonal industries such as those the hon. member mentioned—tourism or the fishery, for example—are concerned that the EI changes are going to cause them to lose skilled workers. Yes, they are seasonal workers and do not work 52 weeks of the year, but in the fish plants, the tourism industry, the crafts industry and so on, we are talking about a skill set that could be lost because the workers will have to move away as a result of the changes in the EI regulations.

That is a very good question. Employers are very concerned.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to support the motion of the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain, which reads:

That this House call on the Conservative government to abandon plans to further restrict access to Employment Insurance for Canadian workers who have followed the rules and who will now be forced to choose between taking a pay cut of up to 30% or losing their Employment Insurance benefits.

I support this motion. It is necessary to do so because we have before us Bill C-38, a budget implementation bill that we call the Trojan Horse bill because there are so many things hidden in it. It is extremely controversial for this reason as well as others. It contains far too much. We have said many times that this bill should be split into at least five parts. It cannot be examined in the proper committee because the Standing Committee on Finance is discussing the environment. This bill should be examined by the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities or the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development. It needs to be examined in the proper place.

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Moreover, the Conservatives are limiting debate. They are not only reducing the time the committees have to debate this bill, but they are also passing time allocation motions in the House. Once again, the Conservatives are trying to distract Canadians while they impose major, negative changes on them. By way of evidence, did the Conservatives talk about changes to environmental law, old age security and employment insurance during the election campaign? No. They did not say a word about those issues. They hid their intentions throughout the election campaign.

Let us now discuss the section of Bill C-38 that deals with employment insurance, which is also very controversial. Members of Parliament have to vote without having received much information. The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development said that she has not yet announced the details as she wants to make sure that the bill passes first.

What details are we talking about? Just trifles; for example, the definition of suitable employment or the acceptable distance to be travelled. The bill abolishes the existing definitions, but when we ask for clarification and new definitions, the information is very vague. For example, a reasonable commuting time is said to be one hour. Is that one hour by car? If I drive for one hour, I will be halfway to Montreal.

What about the people in remote areas who do not own cars? Will they also have to travel one hour by car? In some parts of my riding, there are far fewer north-south public transit routes. Will these people have to spend one hour on the bus? How will it work? We do not know. In short, major changes to employment insurance are hidden inside a mammoth bill. Once again, the Conservatives are controlling the debate on the bill. That is not all.

When we listen to what some of the Conservatives are saying we can hear the contempt they have for employment insurance recipients. During her appearance yesterday at the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development said that the government was working on removing disincentives to work. She added that it is question of improving the federal system in order to ensure that Canadians better understand what is expected of them when they receive employment insurance benefits.

Such comments suggest that EI recipients are abusing the system. There are indeed people who abuse the system, but they are the exception. Not everyone abuses the system, but they are being treated as though they do. I invite the Conservatives to come to Hochelaga and see what life is really like, what people really need. Employment insurance is a social safety net that was established decades ago to respond to a real need. This tool that Canadians created to be used when they need help is getting a bad rap from the Conservatives. I wonder sometimes whether they really know anyone who is poor.

Let us now talk in greater detail about the changes proposed by the Conservatives and the ensuing problems. Take job search, for example. The government says that it is going to send out emails about available jobs twice a day.

I knocked on a lot of doors during the election campaign. When I told people to consult our website to learn more about the NDP platform, they would often tell me that they did not have Internet access, that they could not afford it or that they did not have a computer. They could have gone to the library, but the Conservative government has cut the community access program, so there are a lot fewer computers available in libraries.

The hon. members might recall that, a few months ago, the Service Canada job search website did not work for a number of weeks. So what happens in those types of situations? Are the people going to be penalized? But one of the biggest problems—and we are going to hear about it a lot—is the impact on the regions and on seasonal work. Let us talk about seasonal work. Seasonal workers are often highly skilled workers. You cannot just drag people around from job to job.

● (1305)

Under the proposed measures, these people could be forced to leave their skilled occupations or their regions or both. As an example, a witness who raises silver foxes recently appeared before the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. That industry has a six-month season and he has one employee who has very specific expertise and who returns every year.

This employer told us that if his employee did not come back, he would not know what to do or where to find another employee with that kind of expertise. The witness also told us that the same is true in horticulture and livestock farming.

In-school child care services are another example. Do we really want to have to look for new child care providers every year? Do we want people with a lot less experience looking after our children every year?

Every January and February, only a few groups came to visit the museum where I used to work. As a result, at least 10 of the 20 guides would not get any hours. Zero. So they needed employment insurance every year. Since those guides have been there for three or four years, they would automatically fall into the new category of frequent claimants. This means that if they have not found another job after six weeks, they would have to accept work at 70% of their previous hourly wage or they would no longer be entitled to employment insurance.

By the way, in Quebec, 15% of employment insurance claimants are seasonal workers. Instead of a short-term and repressive view for reducing the unemployment rate, perhaps there might be other options. For example, we could invest in training. But no, the Conservatives are making cuts to training.

I have two examples from the recent budget. First, we see cuts of \$44 million—so, 64.7%—to contributions that help older unemployed workers in communities with a high unemployment rate or those affected by downsizing. Then, transfer payments to apprenticeship incentive grants and apprenticeship completion grants, worth \$155 million, are being cancelled completely. It makes no sense.

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Furthermore, when the government gives grants to large companies, perhaps it could ensure that jobs are created quickly—in Canada, not in Mexico or the United States—and that the companies do not take the money before relocating elsewhere, which is what Caterpillar and Electrolux did.

I have three more comments to make before I wrap up. First, employment insurance is fully funded by employees and employers. It belongs to employees and employers. What is the point of paying into it if you are not allowed to use it? It would be like buying a car and not being allowed to drive it.

The new definition of suitable employment suggested by the minister is at odds with the International Labour Organization's, which says that a government seeking to promote employment and guard against unemployment should take into account the claimant's training, experience and qualifications.

The third and final point I would like to make is that by forcing workers to take lower-paying, less fulfilling jobs that they are likely to quit more rapidly, the government will increase rather than decrease poverty.

I would like to reiterate what I said at the beginning of my remarks: this motion is important and must be adopted.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as my colleague correctly pointed out, there are many seasonal workers. The government says that there is a lot of demand. It is true that, in some provinces, there is significant demand. However, that demand is for workers with specific skills.

Does my colleague agree that it would be better to ensure that Service Canada is staffed with enough advisors to better serve people by sitting down with them, rather than attack workers who need employment insurance to provide for their needs during the post-employment season and to support their search for work in their field? Should there not be better tools available to determine the qualifications for these jobs?

I was a member of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities for a while, and that is what employers told us. There is no good database that can match workers' skills to available jobs.

Would it not be better to invest money in better tools and more advisors to help young people?

• (1310)

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, I obviously completely agree with that. Unfortunately, cuts have been made to service centres. According to employers and the people who testify before the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, where we are examining the shortage in certain areas, the changes that are being made now will do the complete opposite of what the Conservatives claim to want to do.

For example, people will be required to take jobs that are not in their field or that are further from where they live. They will not be happy. They will not stay long. They will once again end up on employment insurance. Some regions will empty and, as I was

saying earlier, in seasonal sectors, many employers will not be able to find enough staff.

I always support a positive approach over a negative one. Why punish people when we could take positive actions and do good things?

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, what the Conservative government is doing in terms of these changes will have a profoundly negative impact on seasonal jobs from coast to coast, and in particular, as our Liberal Party critic talked about, in the province of Quebec, in Atlantic Canada and so forth.

One needs to question why the government decided to bring in these changes through the back door of Bill C-38, thereby preventing debate on this issue and, most important, to then have the debate carry on into a committee of the House where experts from across Canada could participate and provide what I believe is absolutely critical information because of the impact this change will have on our economy and on industries that are so dependent on seasonal jobs.

Does the member not agree with the Liberal Party's stand that Bill C-38 should have been broken down, that there should have been several pieces of legislation brought in and that this should be a stand-alone debate taking place on a separate bill?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet: Mr. Speaker, of course I agree. I said that earlier in my 10-minute speech.

Why are the Conservatives doing this? I also mentioned that they said nothing about this during the election campaign. They were probably worried that it would not be a particularly popular subject. I understand that they were worried about this because if I had been in their place I would have been worried too.

The other thing, as the member mentioned, is that because this bill is not broken down, debate on each issue is cut short. There is no discussion among experts. The people on the finance committee are very nice, they are smart, but they are not experts on employment insurance or the environment, for example.

The Conservatives are trying to push everything through quickly. This is an excuse to bring in a bunch of things that they wanted to bring in before. Because they now have a majority, they are using this excuse to bring everything in at once.

[*English*]

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time today with the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

As many government members have already stated, we cannot support a factually incorrect motion.

I would like to drill down on some of the details of what our government is actually proposing with this legislation.

Business of Supply

The changes we will make will ensure that unemployed Canadians are made aware of all available work in their local labour markets within their skill set. However, if there is no available work within their skill set, then EI will be there to support them. It always has been there to support them and always will be there to support them.

As indicated in Bill C-38, the jobs, growth and long-term prosperity act, the government intends to establish clear definitions for suitable employment and reasonable job search. Please note that these improvements can only apply to Canadians receiving regular EI benefits and EI fishing benefits. They will not apply to Canadians receiving EI for special benefits, such as maternity, parental, compassionate, or sickness.

Let me focus on suitable employment for a moment.

Several factors will affect the definition for suitable employment. These factors will include, first and foremost, the personal circumstances of that person who applies. This is a point that the opposition members have been very ignorant on as they attempt to scare Canadians with respect to the impact of these changes. As a member of Parliament from Atlantic Canada, I want to assure my constituents that the personal circumstances of an EI claimant will always be taken into account when determining what is considered suitable employment.

Claimants receiving EI will not have to accept work if they have a health problem that prevents them from taking a particular job, or if they have family obligations that prevent them from working at certain times of the day or if they have limited transportation options for commuting them to and from work. If they are not physically capable of performing work, they will not be required to take that job.

As the minister of HRDSC stressed again at committee yesterday, these changes would be implemented in a fair, practical and reasonable way.

What has not been reasonable is for the opposition to enlist in a campaign of fearmongering on topics such as commuting time. Under our proposed changes, a workplace must be within an hour's commute unless the claimant's previous commuting history and the community's average commuting times are longer than that. It is simple common sense.

Let me focus on the two criteria for suitable employment that are drawing the most attention. They are the type of work and the wages that are considered reasonable. In determining what criteria apply, EI claimants will be placed in one of three categories: long-tenured workers, frequent claimants and occasional claimants.

Let me take a few moments to define each of these categories.

Long-tenured workers are those who have paid into the EI system for seven of the past 10 years and who over the last five years have collected EI or fishing benefits for 35 weeks or less. These workers would be initially required to look for a similar job that would pay for 90% of their previous wages. After 18 weeks on EI benefits, long-tenured workers would be required to expand their job search to jobs within the field of one they previously held and to apply for jobs that would be above 80% of their previous wages.

Frequent claimants are those who have had three or more claims for regular or fishing benefits and have collected more than 60 weeks of EI benefits in the past five years. They would be required to expand their job search to jobs similar to the job they normally performed from the start of their EI claim. They would also be required to look for work that paid wages starting at 80% of their previous hourly wage. After receiving benefits for six weeks, they would need to expand their search to any work they would be qualified to perform so long as the wages would be within 70% of their previous employment.

Occasional claimants would include those not captured by the definitions of frequent and long-tenured workers. Occasional claimants would be allowed to limit their job search for their usual occupation, with similar wages of at least 90% of their previous hour wage for the first six weeks of their claim. After receiving benefits for six weeks, they would have to expand their job search to jobs similar to the one they normally performed, with wages that would be within 80% of their previous earnings. After 18 weeks, they would then need to further expand their job search to include any work they would be qualified to perform, as long as the wage would be at least 70% of their previous earnings.

• (1315)

It is a sad testament to fearmongering in which the opposition has engaged that I feel the need to point out the obvious, which is that no one would ever need to accept employment below minimum wage in Canada. The simple truth is that under these changes, EI claimants will always make more money working than by collecting EI, which is currently not the case.

As many people know, employment insurance pays 55% of an individual's average weekly income. The maximum annual salary used to calculate the weekly average is \$45,900 per year. Therefore, if an individual is a frequent claimant and a reasonable job search will offer at least 70% of previous earnings, that is a substantial increase over 55% of the earnings that would be collected on EI.

This is why the opposition motion we are debating in the House today is factually incorrect. Canadians receiving EI will only be required to look for work that pays significantly more than they are currently collecting on EI. It is a net benefit to claimants.

Let me also be clear on a further point. As a Canadian from Atlantic Canada, I understand that in many small communities there may not always be economic opportunities outside peak seasons of employment. The Prime Minister has been perfectly clear on this point. If there are no available jobs in one's community, EI benefits will continue to support Canadians as they always have.

Let me turn briefly to the topic of a reasonable job search.

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Canadians receiving EI benefits will be required to undertake job search activities, including researching and assessing job prospects, drafting a resumé, searching for job vacancies, applying for positions, attending interviews and undertaking other efforts to improve their employability, such as attending workshops, going to employment agencies and also job fairs.

EI claimants will also be required to look for a job daily and to keep records of their job searches. These search efforts will be consistent with the opportunities that are available. For example, in a community with few job openings, a job search should focus on identifying new opportunities and not applying for the same job or to the same business every day. In comparison, a job search in an area with numerous job opportunities should focus on both identifying and applying for available positions.

As part of the investment we are making under this initiative, EI claimants will be made aware of local jobs in their local labour market.

These improvements to EI will help more Canadians get back into the labour force and enable them to better support themselves and their families.

Unfortunately, we have seen the opposition attempt to play politics of fear and to confuse Canadians into believing some of these things are not true. Sadly, this is not the first time we have seen members of the opposition ignore clear realities of the Canadian economy in order to advance their narrow interests.

I would ask all hon. members in the House to support our government's plan for jobs, growth and economic prosperity. This is the reason Canada is leading the G8 in growth of 750,000 net new jobs created since the depth of the recession in July 2009. Therefore, I encourage members to join me in voting against this factually incorrect motion.

• (1320)

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to my colleague from Nova Scotia, where the minimum wage is \$10 an hour. Is he suggesting maybe most folks in Nova Scotia are really happy working for \$10 an hour? It seems that is what he is suggesting.

Clearly the reason Canadians are afraid has nothing to do with New Democrats making them afraid. It is the government that is making them afraid, because it does not want to come clean. It actually does not want even to tell us what the definition is of suitable employment, job search and all of those things. If it did, it would have put that in the bill. Instead the Conservatives do it by stealth. They send a minister out to suggest that maybe it is this and another minister out to suggest that maybe it is that.

Finally they come clean and the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development makes an announcement. The next day the Minister of Finance says to the premiers of Nova Scotia, P.E.I. and Newfoundland and Labrador that they can talk about that.

Who is confused? People on EI are confused, and they are confused because the government is still confused. It still does not know what it wants to do and still has not figured out exactly the

definition of terms respecting the unemployed because it does not care about the unemployed, quite frankly.

What it really is about is punishing workers in our country. We have 1.4 million people unemployed, and the Conservatives talk about 100,000 available jobs. That is marvellous. Their arithmetic is faulty.

This is about having a sense of compassion for those who are unemployed and to trying to help them, not punish them.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Speaker, I reject the premise of the statement of the member of the opposition. What we are doing is putting a policy in place which would help people up and not hold them back.

We have initiated several programs within EI which will help support Canadian workers, for example, the working while on claim. This allows people to continue to collect their unemployment insurance claim while taking on part-time employment. This was not the case before.

We are extending that in this project so that people will be able to now collect up to 50% of their claim and continue to collect their EI claim. This is a net benefit for those workers and encourages them to actually take employment. It does not encourage them not to take a part-time job because they might put their EI claim at risk.

These are progressive changes we are making in the system that are going support the workers, both seasonal workers and workers who work all year round. We are supporting workers. We are encouraging them to get back to work. We are going to help them find that job and get them back to work as quickly as possible.

• (1325)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate my—

Mr. Robert Chisholm: Ask him about the blueberry pickers.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, that is a very valid suggestion from my colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour.

It is one thing to come to this chamber to represent the views of the government, but it is important that we represent the views of the people who send us here. In doing so, I would ask my colleague this. What is the sense from the people who run Sunrise Greenhouses in Pugwash, or Advocate Seafoods, or the fish plant down in Wallace? How are they accepting these changes that are being put forward by the government?

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Speaker, I have talked with several of those people. Once we explain these changes and how they will benefit the workers getting back to work, how they will benefit them for taking part-time employment while they are on claim without penalizing them and holding back money from their claim, they are fine with the changes.

The problem is the fearmongering and the spreading of untruths, and I am not saying that member is doing it. However, there are opposition members who are using these changes to scare unemployed people and to score cheap political points, quite frankly, rather than using these types of positive policy changes to encourage people to get back to work, to help them find employment. It is absolutely disgraceful.

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[Translation]

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC)
Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege for me to address this House today in support of an initiative that will allow our workers to find jobs more quickly.

I would first like to congratulate the hon. member for Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley. The hon. member is from New Brunswick and I am from Quebec, of course. He clearly showed that the program is beneficial for his region. It is a win-win situation.

It is certainly a win for our employers in Bellechasse and Les Etchemins who need people. We are hiring in Bellechasse and Les Etchemins. People are coming from Quebec City and Montreal. We even have people from outside the country. One of the companies I am thinking of is Exceldor, where most of the workers in one of the production facilities come from every corner of the world.

We need workers. We need an active workforce in Bellechasse and Les Etchemins right now, and in Lévis too. That is why we want to create tools so that workers in search of jobs, people who are temporarily out of work or out of the labour market, can have access to the jobs that are available.

Is it not bizarre that the New Democrats, who say they want to help working people, want to stop them from finding jobs? Have you thought about how illogical their position is, today, when they oppose the idea of job seekers finding a job?

Fortunately, here on the government side, we have created 750,000 jobs. Why? Because we have companies that are not suffocated by taxes and operate in a context of prosperity that benefits all of us here in Canada. This country is the envy of many others in the OECD. That means that our Minister of Finance is praised both in Europe and by all the big economic decision-makers.

So the measure we are proposing today is a win-win measure. I would like to explain why. First, it enables working people who are looking for jobs to have easier access to the pool of jobs available in their immediate environment. There are tools like the Internet, for example, or various communication tools. That is why we are investing. In fact, we are investing \$21 million. Today, we need only look to the extensive use being made of communication tools by the new generation, in particular, whether that be the Internet, social networking or the various communication systems available to us.

Essentially, with what is called Job Alert, we will be able to inform people who are looking for work about jobs available in their area. That is the first measure. It must be remembered that the employment insurance system is in fact Canada's largest labour market access program. It is therefore important to ensure that it is on the leading edge of the technology. That is one of the first things our program does. It connects workers with the jobs available. That will apply everywhere, throughout Canada.

It means that Canadians who are receiving employment insurance benefits will receive daily notices of job postings from a variety of sources, so they are aware of jobs that are available in their region. So far, this is a measure that should gain the unanimous approval of the parliamentarians who are here today.

The second measure is also sensible and intelligent. It aims to ensure that if there are jobs available in regions, workers who have the skills to fill those jobs will be able to access them. That means that instead of receiving employment insurance benefits, which provide only a fraction of the income they were making, workers will be able to earn additional income.

• (1330)

Because of this measure, workers who are looking for a job will be able to temporarily, or, you never know, perhaps over the longer term, work at jobs that will put more money in their pockets. It is another measure that is very sensible and warrants the approval of all parliamentarians. The purpose of the measure is to enable workers to connect with jobs that are available and to tell people seeking work that there are opportunities for them in their area that will enable them to obtain additional income besides employment insurance benefits.

So I think that it is important to tell those who are watching us today that it is a reasonable measure, one that is beneficial to workers because it enables them to earn additional income and thereby have more money in their pockets. For example, during the off-season, if there are jobs available, seasonal workers will be able to fill these jobs. That will give them access to more ready income to support their families. This is the second measure in this reform being put forward by our Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, a measure that will be very beneficial to all regions across the country.

The third factor is that there are currently jobs that are not necessarily filled by Canadians. Foreign workers are even brought in to fill these positions. Would it not make more sense to first offer these jobs to Canadians? It is very simple. There are jobs available here in Canada. We have Canadian workers who have the skills to fill these jobs.

So before offering them to foreign workers, would it not be logical to develop mechanisms to ensure that these jobs here in Canada are first offered to Canadians and filled by Canadians? It strikes me as a rather basic principle that should gain the assent of every parliamentarian in this House.

To summarize, there are three important principles. The first is to connect available jobs to workers. The second, which is equally important, is of course to ensure that the jobs available in our regions are first filled by Canadian workers. Of course our country, which welcomes people from many nations, will continue to be happy to offer some jobs to other countries. These are straightforward measures.

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• (1335)

[*English*]

We want to ensure that it is fair for all Canadians and that it provides the right level of support given the availability of jobs wherever they happen to live.

At the same time, we are proposing new EI measures that will help EI claimants to get back to work more quickly. Our government is committed to making targeted, common sense changes to the EI system so that Canadians are better encouraged and supported in their job search.

Canada's well-trained and highly educated workforce is one of our key advantages in competing and succeeding in the global economy. However, too often barriers or disincentives discourage workforce participation. We are making changes to ensure that the EI system better supports employers who have jobs to fill and we are also going to ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not.

We are investing \$21 million over a two-year period in new targeted measures to help unemployed Canadians find jobs more quickly.

[*Translation*]

I must say that we realize that some Canadians have a hard time finding employment, especially when there is no work during the slow season that some regions experience. Today, those people can rest assured that if there are no jobs available, they will be entitled to their benefits.

This is a balanced initiative, and I encourage every member of the House to support it because this is what we need to ensure that our workers have more money in their pockets.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his speech, even though I do not share his point of view.

What he calls reasonable I call contempt for the workers who have contributed their entire lives in order to have employment insurance when they need it.

Why is the government creating three categories of recipients: frequent claimants, long-tenured workers and occasional claimants? That is no way to divide up the unemployed.

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her question.

I would remind her that, every day, millions of Canadians go to work and contribute to our economic prosperity. Of course, some regions or areas are less fortunate, but I would also remind my colleague that, in Quebec, we need workers for harvesting. This is spring, a time of year when there is a significant need for workers.

As we are speaking, some EI recipients could make some extra money by filling those jobs. Our goal is very simple: we want available jobs to be filled by people from here, by Canadians, so that they can earn some extra income.

I am sure the hon. member agrees that Quebec workers would have more money in their pockets by taking a job than by collecting EI benefits.

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is disheartening.

The member talks as if farmers were not aware that Canadians cannot do that work. The government is creating categories of workers and it is also creating cheap labour.

We should not think that foreign workers are not an important asset to our economy. Right now, in this debate, some rather despicable labels are being used, if I may say so.

The problem is that while the government may want to connect workers with jobs, it is disconnecting them from their region. That is the real issue. If we want to be compassionate towards seasonal workers, if we want to understand how tourism, agriculture, forestry or fishery works, we must first understand that there are meteorological and regional realities.

Instead, the government is taking action without consulting the provinces. Of course, it will be able to say that EI numbers have gone down, because there will be more welfare recipients. And if there are more people on welfare, it means the provinces will have to bear the burden. The money always comes from the same pockets.

Why did the government not consult? Instead of overreacting, it could have developed a strategy for seasonal workers before creating cheap labour and telling people to move to regions where there is work available.

Will the Conservatives also provide the train ticket?

• (1340)

Hon. Steven Blaney: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for the question.

I would first like to assure the member that the proposed measures would affect about 1% of claimants who are looking for work. So, clearly, the impact of this measure would be relatively minimal.

I am glad my colleague mentioned the regions, because I have the privilege of representing a region with an extraordinary entrepreneurial spirit. Last week, I visited Rotobec, a company that exports equipment around the world for the forestry industry and for the recovery of waste materials. Just last week, the head of the company was supposed to go to Chile. The company is based in Sainte-Justine, in Les Etchemins. These businesses need skilled workers—engineers, welders and workers who build state-of-the-art equipment and who are world leaders in the industry.

We need to ensure that the people of Bellechasse who are looking for work will know that jobs are available and that they can earn more money, be better off and contribute to the wealth of our regions.

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am not at all pleased to be rising in the House today. In general, I am happy, indeed very happy to be here, but I am less happy to have to debate this issue.

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I will say at the outset that I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Rivière-des-Mille-Îles.

I would like to go back a few years in time to the root of the matter to remind hon. members that the problem we are facing today has been fabricated. It has been created by those who are now exploiting it for the purpose of making decisions that are truly contemptuous of Canadians in general, more particularly Canadians who are currently having trouble finding a job.

If, a few years ago, the Liberal and Conservative governments had not dipped into this fund, which Canadian workers paid into out of their own pockets, it would now stand at more than \$50 billion and not be an underfinanced fund of less than \$2 billion. Now, the government can exploit the idea that the fund needs attention because it will be short of money. It can say that people are abusing this paltry sum of \$2 billion. Collectively, we had produced a \$50 billion cushion, but it is no longer there. If we had that money today, we could introduce a pilot project to help the regions solve the problems the seasonal industries are facing. There would not be a problem.

There could be a major reform to do exactly what countries with few human resource problems, such as Germany and Norway, are currently doing: focus on ensuring the money is used for their obsession with ongoing training. That is the key. In Germany and Norway, when someone wants to take a course, they do not take away his employment insurance benefits if that course serves economic needs. If someone does not know how to read but wants to learn, he does not lose his benefits. He is asked if he is able to learn to read within a certain number of weeks. Those countries have understood that if they support their citizens in learning basic skills or trades that are in great demand, the entire community will be more prosperous in the short and medium terms.

If Canada had the \$50 billion in its possession right now, it could start establishing those policies across Canada and see Canada become as prosperous as Norway and Germany.

I would like to remind the House that the two countries in question are not at the same end of the spectrum. The Norwegians are clearly social democrats, but the situation is not that clear in Germany. However, both countries share this obsession with ongoing training and use job search tools with a view to training people. And yet they are stuck in an economic quagmire much worse than ours.

The U.S. economy is struggling to get back on its feet, but it is not a disaster. Yet, these two economies are located close to partners, Greece and Spain, which are having major problems and are on the verge of economic disaster. Despite this terrible mess, they are succeeding with fewer human resource problems and a level of prosperity that is comparable or superior to our own. They have not used tools as big as \$50 billion to help people prepare for employment. This money was squandered on all sorts of things, so that now this government can exploit the bogus underfunding of what should have been a major tool for Canada's prosperity.

Now we have before us Bill C-38, which reduces human resource and environmental problems to budgetary issues. The budget will fix everything.

I made an important note to myself: the budget is the top priority. The proof of this is that the vast majority of NDP governments in the provinces have an exemplary roadmap enabling them to deliver balanced budgets, with a few rare exceptions. Overall, the NDP has been more successful in this regard than other provincial governments. It is a top priority.

The problem, when it comes to the big issues and the major responsibilities in society—the environment and human resources—is that when things are limited to a budgetary analysis, it is easy to lose sight of the investment and sustainability side of things.

• (1345)

This is normal. If I am responsible for the budget, the only question I ask myself is whether I can save \$2 tomorrow. I want to save \$2 tomorrow. I do not ask myself whether that \$2 is going to cost us \$25 in terms of loss of skills and investments for the future. Bill C-38, the mammoth budget bill, reduces hugely important responsibilities, such as the environment and human resources, to a simple budgetary calculation, and nothing lacks long-term vision more than that.

My next comments will focus on what is happening in the regions. Since I was elected, Service Canada centres have actually been closed in the regions despite the fact that in the last election campaign the Conservative Party unveiled with great fanfare, in Quebec at least, a slogan that read “power to the regions”—that vaguely reminded me of slogans from a gentleman by the name of Duplessis, in Quebec—and despite the fact that for 40 days they plastered telephone poles with the slogan. In towns in my riding, 20%, 25% or 30% of the postal services have been closed.

We have just learned that there will be a 50% cut in rail service between Halifax and Toronto. Why not? The government is going to hit the tourism industry hard. Why not also arrange things so that fewer tourists can take the night train to go and spend a week in the maritime provinces or Quebec? Why not? An excellent idea, good timing, terrific.

And now here we are, dealing with this employment insurance reform that deals a huge blow to the tourism industry, which by its very nature is highly seasonal. Many regions are extremely attractive in the summer, but not in winter. They therefore find it difficult to develop. Even the most brilliant business people in these regions are unable to develop a 12-month cycle. Believe me, if they could they would. These are business people and they are brilliant. If there was a way to come up with an initiative that would be the least bit viable in December, January and February, they would do it.

Business of Supply

For almost a month now, in my role as the NDP critic for SMEs and tourism, I have met with many people from Quebec and the maritime provinces. I met with Minister Paris in Nova Scotia. And of course, I met with the organizations in my own bailiwick, such as Tourisme Rivière-du-Loup. I met with the people who handle tourism for the Acadians, those who administer tourism for all of Newfoundland and Labrador and all of Nova Scotia, and those who handle special tourism development projects in southern Nova Scotia.

I met with dozens of organizations. Fully one-third of them said that they were worried. Two-thirds told me that they were truly angry about the decisions currently being made. They all said that they had never been consulted. We are talking about an industry that is worth billions of dollars. We are talking about close to \$1 billion for New Brunswick alone, approximately \$2 billion for Nova Scotia and over \$5 billion for eastern Quebec. We are talking about a multi-billion dollar industry that necessarily goes through difficult economic cycles. The people in this industry are therefore directly affected by the kind of employment insurance reforms that are going to be forced down the throats of Canadians, even though they were never consulted.

The current government is telling them not to worry because of the so-called “reasonable” clause. They put the word “reasonable” in their bill. The word means absolutely nothing if it is not defined first. It will be reasonable based on what and from whose point of view? I will give just one example of something impossible.

Like me, a senior Conservative government official from eastern Canada asked the question, and he had no more of an answer than I did. Let us imagine a hotel manager who, in the four winter months, loses 80% of his business. It is a seasonal industry and there is no ski hill beside his inn. Will he work at the corner hardware store for four months?

The businessman who owns the corner hardware store knows that the hotel manager is a bright man and, for years, he has not hired him for those four months because it is not cost-effective to give him two months of training for him to learn all about paint, when he will then leave to go back to the hotel.

• (1350)

Business people in the regions are not idiots. They are bright people. I find this government extraordinarily presumptuous when it says that it will establish a system that will finally work for them.

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the question that I would like to ask the hon. member for Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup is very simple.

First, a bill makes it possible to connect workers with available jobs. Then, a program allows our workers to have more money in their pockets during the off-season, before returning to their seasonal jobs. Finally, there is a measure designed to give available jobs to Canadians before offering them to foreign workers.

So, my question is very simple. Why oppose a measure that is of benefit to workers in every region, particularly the regions of Quebec?

Mr. François Lapointe: Mr. Speaker, clearly, the hon. member did not pay very close attention to what I just said.

The term “reasonable” is not defined and it is unmanageable. In an industry that is seasonal and cyclical by nature, there is no answer. I would like to believe that the members opposite are acting in good faith, but there is no answer.

The example that I gave earlier is unmanageable for entrepreneurs in the regions.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, Liberals understand that the changes the government is bringing forward would have a devastating impact on tens of thousands of Canadians. We believe that the government is using the back door to implement these changes in Bill C-38. That is most unfortunate. We should be allowed to have a full, healthy debate in the House on separate bills as opposed to bringing in the changes in Bill C-38 through the back door. That is one point I would appreciate the member's comment on.

The second point is about the uncaring attitude of the government with regard to individuals who, in essence, ensure that industries are viable. They may be seasonal jobs, but they are important too. We need to emphasize that all jobs, even seasonal jobs, are important. The Canadians filling those jobs should be recognized and appreciated for their efforts, not penalized by the government taking action of this nature, which is going to hurt Canadians more.

• (1355)

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Lapointe: Mr. Speaker, the member's comments are certainly justified. There has been no consultation. There was a complete lack of consultation. No one can argue with the positive, which is that employment information will be sent out regularly via the Internet. However, 40% of the regions are not connected in some sectors; these are regions where there are a lot of seasonal jobs.

How will this work, then, with a system for which such a fundamental problem was not even considered? There is 40% of the population in a sector that will be unable to take advantage of this so-called service.

Furthermore, I have a hard time believing that, in its current state, the employment insurance program was not even able to manage the extra work in October and November. That was a catastrophe last year. People waited for three months. I do not see how this same service will be able to provide a supposedly new and extraordinary system intended to offer hundreds of jobs that Canadians would have found otherwise. I do not see how. That is not explained anywhere. Is it magic? Surely it is.

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we are in the House to discuss a motion by the official opposition concerning employment insurance.

*Statements by Members***STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS**

• (1400)

[English]

KING GEORGE PUBLIC COMMUNITY SCHOOL

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this year, King George Public Community School is celebrating its 100th anniversary. The staff and students, together with the community, are kicking off their celebrations with an event at the school this Friday.

King George School was started in 1911 due to a demand for schools for children of new immigrants coming to Canada. Throughout its history, King George School has educated several notable individuals, including Gordie Howe and Art Jones.

An integral part of the school's vision has been to build strong and lasting relationships, and is the foundation of its legacy and resilience over time.

Mr. Speaker, I invite you, together with all of my colleagues, to join me in congratulating King George Public Community School on its 100th anniversary.

* * *

[Translation]

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the importance of entrepreneurship in my riding. Whether they use the co-operative model, as in the case of the Coopérative de solidarité Place du Marché in Ripon, which does great work for local producers, or the corporate model, as in the case of Les Aliments Lebel in Lachute, which is the largest manufacturer of ice cream and frozen desserts in Quebec, entrepreneurs are dedicated people with deep roots in their communities.

However, the Conservatives are slashing programs that help local economic development. By abolishing the co-operative development initiative and making cuts to the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat, they are attacking an innovative model that thrives on solidarity.

The cuts to the Economic Development Agency of Canada illustrate the Conservatives' lack of interest in our rural entrepreneurs. The Conservatives' economic action consists of making cuts everywhere and any which way.

* * *

[English]

RETIREMENT CONGRATULATIONS

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is with great pleasure that I recognize Mr. Doug O'wram, retiring deputy vice chancellor and principal of the University of British Columbia Okanagan.

Our motion essentially asks the Conservative government to abandon its plans to further restrict access to employment insurance. The proposed changes arise from Bill C-38 to implement the budget. In addition to containing no job creation measures and triggering the dismissal of tens of thousands of public servants, the latest Conservative budget tightens access to employment insurance by giving the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development the authority to create new rules to define what constitutes "suitable employment" and "reasonable and customary efforts to obtain suitable employment." That appears in a budget of more than 400 pages.

Incidentally, the minister refuses to provide all the details of her reform, but is asking us to vote for Bill C-38, which will give her the authority to change the employment insurance plan as she wishes. She is in fact asking us to sign a blank cheque.

We do not have all the details of this reform. However, on May 24, the minister tried to clarify the government's intentions in part, although without disclosing all the details. Essentially, unemployed workers are now more than ever being compelled to find a job outside their area of activity and their area of residence.

We also know that the government will establish three classes of workers based on the frequency with which they file employment insurance claims. After receiving benefits for a certain period of time, unemployed workers will be required to accept lower-paying jobs or else their benefits will be reduced. Frequent claimants, who have filed three or more claims and received more than 60 weeks of benefits in the past five years, will, after a period of time, be required to accept jobs at 70% of their previous earnings. We find those changes unacceptable for a number of reasons.

The main problem with this reform is that it disregards the fact that many businesses operate on a seasonal cycle, particularly those in the tourism, agri-food, forest and other sectors. Seasonal industry makes a major contribution to economic activity. What would Lac-Saint-Jean be without forestry? Where would eastern Quebec be without the fisheries? What would Quebec City and a number of Quebec communities be without the economic contribution of tourists? These industries and the workers who support them contribute to the economic growth of Quebec and the rest of Canada. It is essential that the federal government acknowledge through its programs that these sectors are important and legitimate.

For lack of adequate coverage by the employment insurance program, many workers are abandoning these sectors of activity, leaving business people without skilled workers. For example, Le Quai des Bulles, a Kamouraska business employing a dozen seasonal workers, is afraid it will lose workers as a result of the reform. It is important to understand that 26% of employment insurance claims are filed by seasonal workers, and 30% of those are Quebecers.

I will be pleased to continue my speech after question period.

Mr. Barry Devolin: The time provided for the business of supply has expired. We will now move on to statements by members.

Statements by Members

Since joining UBCO in 2006, Doug Owrarn has done an outstanding job of putting the Okanagan campus on the map and on the road to success. UBCO's motto, "A Place of Mind", exemplifies the thoughtful and determined approach necessary to produce well-rounded and able graduates.

A university, though, is more than just a learning institute. It is a place that functions as a critical link in a community's pursuit for growth and prosperity, where ideas become the solutions that will Canada and the world meet the challenges of the future.

It is a daunting task to have a vision and, even more so, to implement it effectively, but this is exactly what Mr. Doug Owrarn has done, securing UBCO's place as a leader, as an innovator and as a world-class campus of sustainability.

On behalf of all the constituents of Kelowna—Lake Country, I thank Doug for all his contributions to our community. We raise a glass of fine Okanagan wine in his honour and thank him for his leadership and lasting contribution to our community.

* * *

HIV-AIDS

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honour an exceptional Canadian researcher, Dr. Julio Montaner, head of the division of AIDS at UBC and director of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

Dr. Montaner was recently awarded the Grand Decoration of Honour for Services to Austria, given to an individual who has provided outstanding services of public benefit to the country and the world. It cites, "Dr. Montaner's leadership and innovation in HIV and AIDS research has improved the lives of thousands of people in Austria and millions of people throughout the world".

The award recognizes Dr. Montaner's leadership in promoting a major Canadian scientific discovery: highly active anti-retroviral treatment. HAART reduces the viral load of HIV by the second dose, making it impossible to transmit the disease.

Called "treatment as prevention", it is hailed by WHO and UNAIDS. Other nations, including China, have implemented it, yet in Canada only British Columbia has done so, resulting in a consistent decline in new HIV cases there, while other provinces show an increase in HIV.

The federal government refuses to meet or acknowledge Dr. Montaner and this significant achievement. Once again, ideology prevails over science. What a shame.

* * *

ROCKY MOUNTAIN HOUSE

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to draw attention to the great things happening in and around the community of Rocky Mountain House, Alberta.

This bustling and growing community brings opportunity for all businesses and people looking for employment. There is a robust energy sector with numerous companies that operate in the area. Forestry companies, sawmills and laminated lumber plants keep

marching along. Farms and the agricultural sector still contribute greatly to the local economy as people diversity to keep pace.

Tucked close to the eastern slopes of the majestic Rocky Mountains, Rocky is the perfect gateway for outdoor pursuits in the west country. Home to tons of great events and organizations like the Cow Lake Fish Derby, the Rocky Pro Rodeo, the Canadian Rockies Bluegrass Festival, David Thompson National Historic Site, the biannual Rocky air show, Northern Crossing Theatre Group and the Rocky and District Museum, Rocky has something that will pique the interest of people of all ages.

Rocky is also served by a great local media. Listeners can tune in to the always entertaining B94, or read from a gold medal-winning newspaper, *The Mountaineer*, which just won first place in the Canadian Community Newspaper Awards as the best all-around small community weekly paper.

I encourage all Canadians to stop by Rocky Mountain House, where adventure begins.

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● (1405)

LOU GEHRIG'S DISEASE

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, imagine people not being able to walk, write, smile, talk, eat and sometimes even breathe on their own, yet their mind remains intact and the senses unaffected. This is what having ALS is like for 2,500 to 3,000 Canadians who live with this disease.

I rise today to acknowledge June as ALS awareness month in Canada. The ALS Society of Canada was founded in 1977. It is the only national voluntary health organization dedicated solely to fight ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease.

As part of ALS Awareness Month, people will gather on Parliament Hill on June 4 to light 3,000 candles, one for every person living with ALS in Canada. Hon. members are invited to a reception on June 5 to learn more about the ALS community's efforts in Canada.

On June 16, participants in the Ottawa Walk for ALS at the Canadian War Museum will raise funds to support research and quality of life for all.

Let us get together and support ALS awareness.

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2011 MANITOBA FLOOD

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week, I again toured areas devastated by the Manitoba floods of 2011 and met with flood victims and municipal leaders.

Flood victims have had to deal with heartache and headache, and do not seem to be any closer to putting this ordeal behind them.

Statements by Members

These people were artificially flooded by the province due to the operation of the Assiniboine diversion. Not one drop of water that enters the Assiniboine River naturally flows into Lake Manitoba. Water levels in Lake Manitoba are still high and there are no plans by the provincial government to build an outlet that can accommodate the higher flows.

Our federal government has improved the disaster financial assistance arrangements and advanced \$50 million to the Province of Manitoba to help offset the costs of this flood. Economic action plan 2012 also provides \$99 million over three years to assist with the cost of permanent flood mitigation.

The Province of Manitoba is the lead agency for operating emergency measures and processing claims, and its slow pace of settling claims for flood victims and municipalities is adding insult to injury.

It is time for the provincial government to show some resolve and come up with actual solutions and not excuses.

* * *

RIDE TO REMEMBER

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the streets in front of the Hill were buzzing earlier today as motorcycle riders gathered for the 2012 Ride to Remember.

The Ride to Remember was founded in 2005 by Jewish motorcyclists in the U.S. as a way to remember those murdered in the Holocaust and to raise funds for Holocaust education. It has grown into an international event, as today's ceremony on the Hill attests.

Hosted this year by the Toronto motorcycle club Yidden on Wheels, more than 250 riders from Canada, the U.S., Australia and Israel are participating. Riders from the Christian motorcycle group Mission: M25 have also joined in.

Two hours ago, the bikers departed Parliament Hill en route to Trenton and then on to Toronto in the Heroes Highway Ride to also commemorate our Canadian Forces. In Toronto, they will make the pledge of "Never Again!" at a memorial ceremony on Saturday. This pledge acknowledges and memorializes all of the innocent people, six million of them who were Jews, who were mercilessly exterminated by the vicious Nazi regime during World War II.

The pledge also reminds us to stay vigilant to stamp out the seeds of genocide, anti-Semitism and racial hatred.

* * *

[*Translation*]

YOUTH

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we talk a lot about what is in the 2012 budget, but little is said about what is not in it.

I want to talk about those most neglected in this budget, namely our youth, my generation, those who will have to bear the consequences of the changes to employment insurance and to old

age security, and of the blatant lack of good faith of the Conservative government.

The NDP believes that the federal government has a role to play in post-secondary education, as it used to do before the drastic cuts in federal transfers to the provinces, made in 1995 by the Liberal government. Education is a pillar of our society. It is a right and it should be accessible to all, so as to provide our youth with all the opportunities that it deserves, as well as a chance to develop its full potential.

The Conservative government talks about job creation, but what about the training of future workers and their debt load? This government has ignored our youth for too long, and to ignore our youth is to ignore our future. I am rising today to be their voice and to tell them to have confidence, because the change will come in three years.

* * *

● (1410)

[*English*]

NATIONAL HEALTH AND FITNESS DAY

Mr. John Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this Saturday I will launch National Health and Fitness Day in Whistler, West Vancouver and Lions Bay. This annual reminder began as a healthy way in which parliamentarians of all parties meet weekly to run, walk or swim together. We aim to encourage Canadians to aspire to healthier lifestyles.

These activities led to the first ever Bike Day on the Hill and the first ever National Life Jacket and Swim Day on the Hill earlier this month. I salute my colleagues who work together to promote healthy physical activities for all Canadians.

On National Health and Fitness Day, we encourage local governments across Canada to open recreational facilities at a reduced-rate basis to encourage increased participation.

I congratulate all 12 local governments in my riding and other local governments across Canada that have endorsed National Health and Fitness Day.

Parliamentarians, local governments and all Canadians, may we work together to make Canada the fittest nation on earth.

* * *

[*Translation*]

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Fédération des jeunes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick, which was created in 1971, just finished a year of celebration marking its 40th anniversary. The objective of the federation is to represent and protect the interests of young Acadians and francophones. It promotes community leadership and involvement among our youth.

Young people want to be socially involved. Jason Godin is an example. Since May 14, Jason, who is 18 and who voted for the first time, is probably the youngest mayor in Canada. Voters in Maisonnette decided to give our youth a chance.

Statements by Members

Jason, who is a business administration student and who sits on various boards, decided to run for mayor in Maisonnette, New Brunswick. I had the opportunity to talk to him since his election, and I am looking forward to working with him.

As a politician, I have nothing but admiration for young people who get socially involved, and we should support them.

On behalf of the NDP, I wish to congratulate Jason and all the young people who get involved in their community. Your participation is essential.

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[English]

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians have long known that the Liberal Party does not trust parents to raise their own children. Now we have learned that the NDP does not trust our nation's veterans.

This week at committee, an NDP member said that veterans might just use their money to go on vacation. Outrageously, he even went so far as to suggest a veteran might not get his medication so that he could instead go on vacation somewhere hot. On this side of the House we thank and respect those who have served to keep our country safe.

The NDP leader must tell us why his party thinks that nation's heroes cannot be trusted to make the right decision for their health.

[Translation]

Our government will continue to work for our veterans, just like they worked for our country.

* * *

[English]

ME/CFS AWARENESS MONTH

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, May is ME/CFS Awareness Month, myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome.

Chronic fatigue syndrome refers to a severe, continued tiredness that is not relieved by rest and is not directly caused by other medical conditions. Four hundred thousand Canadians are bed-bound or housebound with ME/CFS.

Often misdiagnosed and misunderstood, patients experience muscle aches, headaches and extreme fatigue. Although some patients completely recover after six months to a year, others never feel as they did before they developed CFS.

There is currently no cure for CFS, and so far treatment is focused on relieving the symptoms. As a physician, I know just how the strain of dealing with this disease often leads to depression and other psychological disorders, which make recovery that much more difficult.

Unfortunately, this condition still does not have the recognition it deserves. Increased awareness is the best way to defeat the stigma surrounding CFS.

We must also continue the fight to find a cure and give these Canadians back their lives.

* * *

●(1415)

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in a clear effort to save face, the leader of the official opposition is going on a tour of Canada's oil sands.

I hope, for the opposition leader's sake, that he changes his talking points and does not continue to call hard-working Canadians in the resource industry a "disease". That is what he did. He called them a disease.

Our government recognizes the importance of Canadians in the resource industry. It is clear to us and most Canadians that the only disease is the NDP position that attacking hard-working Canadians is somehow acceptable.

I have to wonder what the member for Edmonton—Strathcona thinks of her leader's comments. Does she agree that her constituents, along with thousands of others across the country, are part of a "disease"?

Her silence tells me that she agrees with her leader's comments. Shame on her.

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GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, "How's it going, eh?" When the toque-wearing, stubby-drinking hosers Bob and Doug McKenzie first graced our TV sets in the eighties, they poked fun at some of the more humorous aspects of Canadian life. "Beauty, eh?" This beloved SCTV segment was born out of government policy aimed at encouraging the Canadian identity.

Founder Dave Thomas is a Walk of Fame actor and has represented Canada at home and abroad for 30 years. Dave has a unique perspective on where Canada is going, and he does not like the direction the Prime Minister is taking. He described Conservative policies as "eroding the liberties of Canadians". He said this Prime Minister is "the worst thing to happen to Canada". It is like finding a case of beer with no mouse in it, eh?

We in the NDP applaud this Canadian icon for adding his voice to the growing opposition the Conservatives are facing, but do not worry, Dave: in 2015 every Canadian voter will finally get a chance to tell the Conservatives to "Take off, eh".

*Oral Questions***THE BUDGET**

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): I doubt that, Mr. Speaker, because last night for the third night in a row the special committee studying the responsible resource development section of the jobs, growth and long-term prosperity act sat for four hours to hear from witnesses. Conservative MPs were there and witnesses were there, but the NDP natural resources and environment critics were nowhere to be found.

The NDP's disappearance is on top of Tuesday night's presentation by the Liberals. Apparently they were unable to find anyone who supports their views, because the Liberal MP for Ottawa South was the Liberals' lone witness. When he did show up, his presentation was ruled out of order and he had to rewrite it on the spot in order to present.

If the critics for environment and natural resources were as serious about these issues as they have claimed, why are they not at committee to discuss them? We have given them unprecedented time at committee to debate the bill, and they have vanished.

They cannot have it both ways. They cannot claim this is the most critical issue in Parliament and then go missing in action.

ORAL QUESTIONS*[English]***THE BUDGET**

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, former Conservative fisheries minister Thomas Siddon is again sounding the alarm on the Conservatives' Trojan Horse bill. Last night he testified that he deplored this attack on environmental protection and that rushing these changes through is "not becoming of a Conservative government".

His message to the Prime Minister was clear, that he should take his time and get it right.

Will the Prime Minister take the advice of his Conservative colleague? Will he split this reckless bill and allow for proper study?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, the particular set of changes in the economic action plan will have more committee study than any budget bill in recent history by quite a magnitude. These are important measures to make sure that our environmental processes are both thorough and efficient, and encouraging of investment. I am glad to see the reaction we have received from investors and the Canadian public.

I look forward to these being passed into law.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is somewhat ironic for New Democrats to have to defend the environmental record of a former Mulroney Conservative government against this very new and different breed of Conservatives.

[Translation]

There was a time when the Conservatives believed in protecting the environment. However, the Conservatives across the floor believe that this protection should be reduced. These changes will even allow cabinet to overturn National Energy Board rulings. The Conservatives are putting politics ahead of science.

Why are they afraid of transparency and science?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives support environmental protection as much as we do economic growth. That is the main difference between our two parties. The NDP thinks it is not possible to protect the environment and that it is necessary to shut down all the industries in Canada. Our position is that we can reconcile these two objectives and provide environmental protection and jobs for Canadians.

● (1420)

[English]

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians from coast to coast to coast and across the political spectrum are concerned about environmental protection that the government is tearing up. Despite the Conservative attempts to intimidate all opposition, thousands upon thousands of Canadians are speaking up in defiance of these reckless attacks.

On June 4, a group of committed charitable Canadian organizations will be blacking out their websites in protest, Oxfam, Amnesty International, supported even by the former vice-president of the National Citizens Coalition. New Democrats will proudly stand with them.

The question is this. Will the government actually listen?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if the NDP member had bothered to check, he would see that the National Citizens Coalition is not a registered charity.

In any case, there are laws for registered charities that assure that, when people donate to charities, those moneys are not used for political activities but for the charitable purposes for which Canadians donate. We will obviously make sure those rules are respected, as the vast majority of good Canadian charities in fact respect them.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are looking for real leadership on the environment, and they are not finding it from the Conservatives.

[Translation]

After Mr. Siddon's testimony last night, the Conservatives decided that they had had enough. After promising to appear before the committee, the Minister of the Environment, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Minister of Natural Resources are all now leaving us high and dry and refusing to defend their Trojan Horse.

Why are these ministers not going to appear?

Oral Questions

[English]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague forgets that on the first day that the subcommittee met to consider Bill C-38, all three ministers met, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, the Minister of Natural Resources and I. We provided two hours of enlightenment to an opposition that was hard-challenged to come up with questions material to the subcommittee's work.

* * *

THE BUDGET

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, at the C-38 hearings, the Conservative majority is pushing through dozens of pieces of legislation with little study. With 753 clauses, that is just three minutes of study per clause.

Now even former Tory ministers are testifying that Conservatives railroading these changes through are wrong.

Last night it got even worse. The Conservatives voted to block bringing ministers back to testify. Why will they not come back? Is the Minister of Natural Resources afraid he will be called on his boast about drinking from tailing ponds?

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I certainly welcome the question because it has just been answered by the Minister of the Environment, who, along with his two other colleagues, the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and the Minister of Natural Resources, appeared as witnesses. That is the important part. They have provided information. They have answered questions.

We understand that at the subcommittee last night, the critics responsible for those two areas did not even show up.

* * *

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Public Works and Government Services has revealed—it is hardly a secret—that the government's defence procurement processes are in a total shambles. I wonder if the Prime Minister would not agree that when it comes to the F-35 contract, which is the largest procurement that is going to be undertaken, before any decisions can be taken with respect to the particular airplane that is being proposed, it is even more important to get the question of the mission for this plane after 2020.

What exactly do we think Canada's foreign policy and defence needs are going to be? Why not go back to the beginning of the process, rather than start where we are today?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, the process began in 1997, during the previous Liberal government, so I do not know why the leader of the Liberal Party would be calling upon me to revisit all of that.

The leader of the Liberal Party makes these sweeping comments about the procurement being in a shambles. The difference under this government is we actually do procure things for our military, so that the men and women in uniform have the equipment they need to do their job.

● (1425)

[Translation]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am well aware that he is still getting advice from his Minister of Foreign Affairs. The problem we have is that yesterday the Minister of Public Works stated clearly, in a speech, that the Prime Minister was wrong.

She said there were problems with time frames and administrative problems. We heard what the Auditor General had to say, which was the complete opposite of what the Prime Minister said. He said that when the Liberal government was in power, there was no problem with the government's military procurement strategy. The problem—

The Speaker: The right hon. Prime Minister.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Liberal Party said there were no problems at that time. We have taken a look at the purchase of the submarines; is he serious?

We have a comprehensive strategy to ensure that our troops have the tools they need to do their work. We will continue to improve the process to ensure that this equipment will be available as soon as possible, but at a good price for taxpayers.

[English]

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with the Conservatives' fiscal ship firmly lodged on Mount Ararat, with an F-35 tied to its deck and a flood of taxpayer dollars flowing down the mountains, the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, in a rare moment of poetical insight, said, "The public and parliamentary confidence in this [F-35] process to date is low". Oh, really?

On the faint possibility that the minister's candid remarks actually represent a change in the government's thinking, could the minister now commit to an open, fair and transparent competition and save the taxpayers some of these dollars?

[Translation]

Mr. Jacques Gourde (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Works and Government Services, for Official Languages and for the Economic Development Agency for the Regions of Quebec, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Public Works is committed to improving and optimizing military procurement to ensure that the Canadian economy, Canadian industry and Canadian jobs can benefit.

* * *

[English]

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last night, at committee, former Conservative fisheries minister Siddon warned us that the Trojan budget bill, "makes a Swiss cheese out of the federal Fisheries Act" because today's Conservatives are abandoning their constitutional duties to protect our fish and fish habitat.

Oral Questions

Mr. Siddon has this simple challenge for the minister. Will the minister stand to say, “I understand what my job entails and I am here to look after fish, full stop”?

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the measures we have introduced in Bill C-38 would allow Fisheries and Oceans Canada to focus its efforts in a practical, sensible way on managing threats to Canada's recreational, commercial and aboriginal fisheries. I know he likes to use former minister Siddon to criticize this new direction we would take here, but let me read this for him. It states, “The policy applies to those habitats directly or indirectly supporting those fish stocks or populations that sustain commercial, recreational or Native fishing activities of benefit to Canadians.”

Who wrote that? It was the Hon. Tom Siddon in the 1986 habitat policy that is still in force here in Canada.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the fact that the member supports what Mr. Siddon has to say. It is clear that the Conservatives would dismantle fish habitat protections and they would sell out our fisheries for short-term corporate profits. Canadians are not buying the minister's claim that this is all about farmers' ditches.

Neither is former minister Siddon, who called what they are doing “a shallow...phony excuse for change”, so I ask the minister to drop the charade, accept the advice from the Conservative predecessor, split the bill and do the right—

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans.

• (1430)

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what we are doing is making changes that would provide greater certainty, consistency and clarity for Canadians, including conservation groups, land owners, municipalities and the provinces. More importantly, this new, focused approach to protecting fisheries would conserve and protect Canada's fisheries for future generations. I wonder what my colleague opposite is opposed to in that.

* * *

[*Translation*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on the contrary, this bill will create a lot more uncertainty.

There was a time when the Conservatives thought it was very important to protect the environment. That is why the Mulroney government implemented the Fisheries Act, which the Conservatives are trying to destroy today.

Yesterday, the former Conservative fisheries minister, Mr. Siddon, told the subcommittee that responsible parliamentarians would withdraw these changes from Bill C-38.

Will the Minister of the Environment listen to his Conservative colleague and split up this irresponsible bill?

[*English*]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, perhaps I can read something else from former minister Siddon's habitat policy from 1986. He said, “In accordance with this philosophy, the policy will not necessarily be applied to all places where fish are found in Canada, but it will be applied as required in support of fisheries resource conservation.”

That is the direction we are going. We are going to be protecting fisheries resources and we are going to be protecting fisheries. This might be a novel concept for the members opposite, but the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans is going to protect fisheries.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the problem is that it is now 2012.

Other Conservatives are against Bill C-38, including voters and the hon. member for Kootenay—Columbia.

The government claims that overlap in federal and provincial jurisdictions is creating delays and unnecessary costs. That is absolutely not true. An internal document prepared for the Minister of the Environment confirms that there has been no overlap since last fall.

What, then, is the real reason behind the government's decision to dismantle environmental assessments in Bill C-38?

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I remind my colleague opposite that legislative improvements to the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act in 2010 did go some distance toward eliminating duplication in environmental assessments. However, we would build on that with Bill C-38 and we have introduced timelines. We would also contemporize processes under the National Energy Board and the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission. We would strengthen and improve what was already in place.

* * *

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government seems to have set a goal of dismantling as many institutions and social programs as possible. Environmental monitoring, old age security and, of course, employment insurance are being put through the ringer. The Conservatives are playing with the employment insurance fund as though it belongs to them. I have some news for them: this fund belongs to the workers and employees who have paid into it over the years to weather the storms that may come.

Oral Questions

Does the minister understand that the employment insurance fund does not belong to her?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the employment insurance system is there for people who lose their job through no fault of their own. It is there to support them while they search for another job and to provide financial support during the transition.

What we want to do is to help these people—the unemployed workers—find a new job much more quickly. We will offer them assistance and any other support they need to find a new job.

[English]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this is not about connecting people to jobs. It is about a government that is demonizing Canadians who, through no fault of their own, have been laid off more than once. This out-of-touch government is forcing people to accept jobs, even if the jobs do not correspond to their qualifications, at much lower wages. The Conservatives may say they support free markets, but clearly not when it comes to the labour market.

When will the minister admit that her changes mean people will now be paying the same premiums for less coverage?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what is really outrageous is the lack of truth in that question.

What we are doing is helping Canadians who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own get more information about jobs within their qualification ranges that are also within their geographic ranges. We are helping connect them with those jobs because, frankly, there is a shortage of skills and labour right across the country. Employers are having to go to the expense and trouble of bringing in foreign workers when in many cases there are qualified Canadians in their area who are available for that work. We want to help those workers get those jobs.

* * *

• (1435)

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY

Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, according to a recent Quebec study, people with foreign-sounding names are 64% less likely to be called for a job interview. Job market discrimination is not just a problem in Quebec. That is why the federal government brought in employment equity measures. Unfortunately, all those measures are going to go under the knife in the Conservative budget. That is another absurdity.

It is already hard enough for young people and immigrants to find a job. Why are the Conservatives making it even more difficult for them?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our priority as a government is fairness and equality in the hiring of employees. That is something we are very proud of, and we are working with officials to ensure this policy is followed.

[English]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Conservatives are forcing unemployed Canadians to take jobs at lower wages and engaging Canadian workers in a race to the bottom. Workers could be forced to take a 30% wage cut. If they are laid off again, they get another 30% wage cut. Conservatives are putting Canadians into a downward spiral of lower wages and reduced eligibility.

Will they agree to base future EI claims on a worker's original wage?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, another fact free question. What we are trying to do is increase employees' earnings by making sure that when they work while they are on claim, they get to keep half of what they earned on top of their EI instead of having it clawed back, as it is now. We want to make sure that work always pays and when people exercise themselves in the market and become more attached to the labour market, they do earn more than they would on EI. That is helping them out.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Fair Wages and Hours of Labour Act took wages out of competition so that contractors on federal projects would win jobs based on their skill and their ability, not their ability to find cheaper and cheaper wages. Incredibly, the Conservatives have repealed the Fair Wages and Hours of Labour Act. I have not noticed a lot of construction workers demanding the right to work for less. In whose interest is it to drive down the wages of Canadian workers, especially on projects built with their own tax dollars?

My question is, by what convoluted logic is it in anybody's best interest to drive down the wages of Canadian workers by repealing the Fair Wages and Hours of Labour Act?

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada is committed to promoting fair and inclusive workplaces free of discriminatory barriers. The amendment is to improve the design and delivery of the federal contractors program by raising contract thresholds and streamlining program requirements. More importantly, modernizing the federal contractors program would reduce the administrative burdens on small and medium-sized contractors, a key recommendation of the Red Tape Reduction Commission.

*Oral Questions***NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, watching the government on the F-35 has been like watching somebody digging a very deep hole. For the past 22 months the Liberal Party has been saying start with a solid statement of requirements based on solid foreign policy and defence objectives, and then hold an open and transparent competition. That way we will get the very best plane for the best price and with the best industrial benefits, but the Conservatives keep digging that hole deeper and deeper.

My advice to them is to stop digging the hole, start over, and save the Canadian taxpayer billions of dollars.

Hon. Julian Fantino (Associate Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it was the Liberal record—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The Associate Minister of National Defence has the floor.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Speaker, it was the Liberal record of appalling negligence that brought us 10 years of darkness. Over these 10 years defence spending in Canada dropped to only 1% of nominal GDP in 2005, a level that placed us in the lowest of the NATO nations.

Our government remains committed to overcoming this lethargic approach to funding our military. We are, in fact, increasing our support for our military, unlike what the previous Liberal government did during its 10 years of darkness.

* * *

• (1440)

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in solidarity with Black Out Speak Out, a campaign to highlight the Conservatives' persistent assault on the environment and democracy, the Liberal website will be darkened on June 4. By silencing scientists—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order.

Order. Once again I will ask members to hold off on their applause until the member has finished putting the question.

The hon. member for Etobicoke North has the floor.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, by silencing scientists, threatening NGOs—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Etobicoke North has the floor.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, in solidarity with Black Out Speak Out, a campaign to highlight the Conservatives' persistent assault on the environment and democracy, the Liberal website will be darkened on June 4. By silencing scientists, threatening NGOs, firing or insulting—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Etobicoke North has a few seconds left to finish putting the question.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, by silencing scientists, threatening NGOs, firing or insulting independent watchdogs, using Revenue Canada as an attack dog or de-funding groups, the message is clear from the government: “Sit down and shut up”.

Today it is environmental groups. My question for the Prime Minister is, who is next?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let us be very clear. It is not the Liberal Party that is blacking out their website. It is the Canadian voter who is blacking it out.

If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there, will anyone hear it?

* * *

[*Translation*]

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it would be better to hear nothing than to hear the absurd answers the Conservatives give us every day.

In fact, speaking of absurd answers, I would like to mention the one from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, who today is quoting what was said by Tom Siddon, the former Minister of Fisheries under Mulroney, saying that at the time, he thought the law was a good one. Indeed, the law is a good one.

Why does the government now want to dismantle the Fisheries Act and withdraw from habitat protection, by burying this scandal in a budget implementation bill? This is scandalous.

[*English*]

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are of the opinion that the Fisheries Act needs modernization. It was originally written in 1868, and that is even a few years before the member for Cardigan arrived here.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. I thought things had been going relatively well up until a few seconds ago. The hon. parliamentary secretary has just a few seconds left to finish his response.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Mr. Speaker, as I said, the measures we have introduced allow us to introduce a new, focused, practical, sensible approach to protecting fish habitat with the goal of protecting fisheries that Canadians depend on.

We are committed to that. I hope the opposition will join us in that.

*Oral Questions**[Translation]***ETHICS**

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the travel claims by the Minister of International Cooperation are a real work in progress that shifts as the winds of scandal blow.

Her staff are not even able to explain why changes were made in the travel claims for trips to Korea, Haiti or Africa. They refuse to provide the details

Changes were already made earlier this year, for her to repay her extravagant expenses. The minister throws money out the window, and then she tries to cover her tracks behind herself.

Can she be honest, for a change, and tell us why those claims were tampered with?

• (1445)

[English]

Hon. Bev Oda (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all incremental costs that should not have been expensed, including extraneous car service, et cetera, have been repaid.

Only appropriate expenses and eligible expenses have been paid by the government.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is not complicated. We want to know how many \$16 orange juice tales there are, how many \$3,000 limousines, and how many deluxe hotel rooms. That is what we want to know.

In fact, it is clear: there is nothing too good for Conservative ministers, as long as the taxpayers are paying. How much was she reimbursed for before she changed her mind, in response to the scandal? We do not know; her lips are sealed. But enough; there really is a limit.

Will the minister finally tell the truth, or is she going to keep quiet and make like she is made of stone, or in her case marble, like her favourite bathrooms?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is not complicated.

The minister has already answered the question. All incremental costs that should not have been expensed, including car service, have been repaid. Only appropriate expenses have been paid by the government.

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if someone in the private sector repeatedly covered up their documents and misrepresented their spending, they would get fired or their employer would call the cops.

However, when it is the Minister of International Cooperation who does it, she becomes just another Teflon Tory. She was caught hiding outrageous limo expenses. She has been caught and had to pay back for her rock star trip to London. Now we find she has been changing the travel claims for her latest round of trips.

Canadians play by the rules, but the government seems to think it is above them. Here is a simple question: what is the minister trying to hide this time?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister has answered this question many times, and I think I have answered it many times.

The fact is that all incremental costs that should not have been expensed have been repaid, including the car service in London. Only appropriate expenses have been paid by the government.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, a couple of weeks ago, a \$3,000 limo ride in London was perfectly appropriate, and then the government got caught. He did not answer the question, which was why the minister was changing her travel claims again.

This is not just about the minister who has become a serial offender of the public trust; this is about the Prime Minister who promised Canadians that he would clean up Ottawa. Instead, he has allowed the minister to misrepresent spending, he has allowed her to hide the paper trail and he has allowed her to mislead Parliament. It is a question of why the Prime Minister decides there is one set of rules for him and his buddies and another set of rules for everyone else.

Why is there no accountability when it comes to that minister?

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have been quite clear.

We want to see tax dollars respected, and that is why ministers on this side of the House spend far less on travel than predecessor Liberal governments spent, and that is why, in this case, only appropriate expenses have been paid for by the government.

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CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last year the Prime Minister and the President of the United States launched the beyond the border action plan, which will strengthen our economy by moving goods to and from the United States in a much more efficient manner.

As part of that action plan, the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities announced today that both governments have agreed to mutual co-operation and recognition of air cargo security in both countries.

Can the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities please update the House on this important initiative?

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, the security of Canada's air cargo system is key to our economic development.

Now air cargo shipped on passenger planes between Canada and the U.S. will be screened only once for transportation security reasons. Canadians and business owners will see a reduction of delays and economic costs caused by both countries screening the same cargo twice.

By working with the United States to find these efficiencies, our Conservative government is getting the job done with the beyond the border plan, because this Prime Minister signed it with the President of the U.S.A.

* * *

[Translation]

MINING INDUSTRY

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the community located next to the Platosa silver mine in Mexico—operated by Exellon Resources, a Canadian company—and the workers have many concerns about the company's behaviour. They appealed to the corporate social responsibility counsellor, but she was unable to do anything because the company refused to take part in the investigation. They therefore had to turn to the OECD.

When are the Conservatives going to review Canada's strategy in this area and adopt stricter standards?

• (1450)

[English]

Mr. Gerald Keddy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member knows that the overwhelming majority of Canadian companies are world leaders in responsible mining practices. They employ hundreds of thousands of Canadian workers who support countless families.

The corporate social responsibility counsellor's review process is a common sense approach that enjoys broad support. The CSR counsellor helps Canadian companies uphold their social and environmental responsibilities when operating abroad. The hon. member already knows that.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let me disagree on that.

[Translation]

The fact is that there is a critical need for a reform of corporate social responsibility.

In recent weeks, we have also heard from delegations from Peru, Guatemala, Colombia and Honduras on possible violations of human rights and environmental standards by Canadian mining companies.

When will this government establish a system that truly protects human rights and the reputation of Canadian companies?

[English]

Mr. Gerald Keddy (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency and for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I reject the premise of the member's question.

Oral Questions

Our government is helping developing countries better manage their natural resources through the new Canadian International Institute for Extractive Industries and Development. Specific incidents are investigated and prosecuted by local authorities.

* * *

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the world has been shocked and horrified by the violence engulfing Syria. In Hula, over 100 civilians were massacred this past weekend, including 49 children.

We must find an end to this conflict, and countries like Russia can play a pivotal role. The British Foreign Secretary visited Moscow this week to urge the Russians to exert their influence to help save lives and end the conflict.

What specific actions will the Minister of Foreign Affairs take to reach out to his Russian colleague?

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wholeheartedly agree with my colleague from Ottawa Centre. Obviously we abhor the violence going on in Syria.

I did spend some time on the phone with British Foreign Secretary William Hague to discuss his recent visit to Russia. Last night I met the Russian ambassador at a social event and indicated that I would be keen to get together with him in short order to discuss the situation in Syria.

[Translation]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, right now, a tragedy is unfolding, one that has gone on for too long. Thirteen new bodies were found yesterday in eastern Syria. Since the beginning of this conflict, there have been over 10,000 victims and hundreds of thousands of refugees. Because it has no seat on the Security Council and too often shows no international leadership, Canada is on the sidelines watching this disaster.

Can the Minister of Foreign Affairs tell us what diplomatic efforts he has made to urge Russia to support a ceasefire?

[English]

Hon. John Baird (Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is regrettable that the member opposite is taking a partisan approach to this issue.

Canada has been actively involved with the broader Friends of Syria group. The French government invited Canada to participate in the smaller working group of that initiative. We are working closely with our allies to coordinate sanctions and coordinate efforts at the United Nations to try to end the violence. We will continue to do that.

An hon. member: What about the Security Council?

Hon. John Baird: Oh, Mr. Speaker, the member for Ottawa South is finally speaking in the House. It has only been a year.

*Oral Questions***EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, when welders are laid off from a pipeline in northern Alberta because of weather, it is not their fault. When substitute teachers in Toronto have no work between classes, it is not their fault. When hotel and fish plant workers in Cape Breton are laid off at the end of the season, it is not their fault. These employees and their employers have paid into the EI system and contribute greatly to our economy.

Why is the Prime Minister calling them repeat offenders and destroying their livelihoods?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, EI, as members know, is a federal program that is designed to help provide financial support to people when they look for a job, when it is not their fault, but it is a temporary mechanism to provide them with support while they look for another job.

We are ensuring that people understand those responsibilities better and provide them with help to find those new jobs. We are also making it worthwhile for those people who have difficulty finding a job to work part-time. We are going to let them keep some of that money for the first time.

We are there for Canadians, and when they cannot find a job, EI will be there for them.

* * *

•(1455)

FISHERIES AND OCEANS

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government's assault on all things important continues, but it is the most recent actions by the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans that is the most disturbing.

Newfoundlanders and Labradorians were shocked to learn that the minister was looting 20 jobs from the St. John's DFO office and moving them to his own riding where no DFO office presently exists. It is a move that will cost Canadian taxpayers millions of dollars.

Does the minister not understand that the misuse of power is inappropriate and will he commit to keep those jobs in St. John's?

Mr. Randy Kamp (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this should not come as a surprise to the other side by now, but our government is committed to finding efficiencies that are moderate and balanced. That is what we have done in this case. There are currently six centres that handle administrative matters—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and for the Asia-Pacific Gateway has the floor.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Randy Kamp: Mr. Speaker, I will start again. As I have said, we are about finding efficiencies that are moderate and balanced. I think that is what taxpayers expect of us.

There are currently six centres that do financial matters on behalf of DFO. We are consolidating those into one so that it can all be done in one place. We think that is a more efficient way to do it and I think most Canadians would agree.

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RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today we learned that the Minister of Transport will not come to the committee to defend his budget. Why? It is because he is afraid he will have to defend the cutting of \$20 million a year from VIA Rail services.

The service plans to cut routes from Halifax to Vancouver, including Toronto, Montreal, London, Kitchener and Niagara Falls. This will start a downward spiral.

Why are the Conservatives cutting the train services that link Canadians from coast to coast to coast?

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, VIA Rail is an important part of the fabric of Canada. This government has invested almost \$1 billion in VIA Rail. In the last budget, we provided \$105 million. This government has invested in VIA Rail.

VIA Rail needs to be nimble enough to be able to deal with different market demands and so on. However, when it comes down to it, this government supports VIA and it is going well. VIA is a great company that helps bring Canadians together. Come and support us.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we now know that with the Conservatives, the reality always lies in what is left unsaid. For example, the Conservatives never said that they were going to cut VIA Rail services. These service cuts affect corridors like Gaspé—Moncton, Montreal—Halifax and many other lines in western Canada.

Rather than invest in a Canada-wide forward-looking transportation strategy, why does the government take an economic approach that amounts to robbing Peter to pay Paul?

[*English*]

Hon. Steven Fletcher (Minister of State (Transport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, our government is committed to safe, economic and efficient passenger rail systems in Canada. We have invested in VIA Rail to build vital infrastructure, create jobs and improve passenger service. VIA regularly reviews its operations and if changes need to be made, it will make the changes. That is up to VIA.

We will continue to work with VIA to ensure we have very good passenger rail. I encourage everyone in this chamber to take the train this summer.

*Oral Questions***NATURAL RESOURCES**

Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP has been very clear that it wants to stop all oil sands development and the hundreds of thousands of Canadian jobs that it creates. NDP leaders, including the former NDP environment critic, have called for a moratorium on oil sands development. Other NDP leaders have just called for a massive carbon tax and pricing scheme that would destroy oil sands development and raise prices dramatically for consumers. It is clear these are reckless schemes that would destroy Canada's economy.

With the leader of the NDP finally visiting my beautiful hometown of Fort McMurray, could the Minister of Natural Resources update the House on the latest developments of this situation?

• (1500)

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the NDP leader seems to consider himself an expert on the oil sands, even though this is his first visit to the important region. It is unfortunate that he did not first take the time to see the project for himself before he endorsed job-killing policies like shutting down the oil sands by 2030. Had he visited, he would not have perhaps insulted western premiers and advocated unsound and reckless economic policies that pit one region against the other.

* * *

GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Government of Canada is taking rural Canadians for granted. Cuts to regional development programs and vital infrastructure created through the community access program signal rural Canada just is not a priority.

The rural population is aging and fewer Canadians are sticking around rural areas to make a living. In the face of this exodus the most savage cut is to the funding and staffing of the Rural Secretariat, which will go from 92 to 15 staff.

Before we start to see ghost towns, will the government reverse its ill-conceived cuts and show it actually cares about rural Canada?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course we care about rural Canada because that is who we represent. Our constituents are all rural Canadians. We anticipate their needs, we love what they do and we continue to celebrate it on this side of the House.

We also work in partnership with our provincial and territorial partners when it comes to rural development. We will continue to do that and build from our side, but the job closer to home is where the initiative needs to be, and we respect that.

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives strutted around during the last election campaign shouting out "our region in power" from every rooftop. It was all for show, a sham. Not surprisingly,

Quebeckers rejected them. By axing employment insurance, they are not creating any jobs. All they are doing is sabotaging the efforts of the people of Charlevoix, the upper north shore and other regions of Quebec that rely on seasonal industries.

Why do the Conservatives stick with their out-of-touch ideology rather than help people in the regions?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on this side of the House, we believe that the best way to help people is to give them a real job. We take pride in the fact that since the beginning of the world recession, over 750,000 jobs have been created here in Canada. That is what is best for people, and that is how to help the regions.

* * *

[English]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, terrorism and threats of radical violence are threats to western nations around the world and Canada is no exception. That is why we have taken strong action, such as establishing Canada's first counterterrorism strategy and following through on recommendations from Justice John Major with the Air India action plan. One important part of that was ensuring that there was a base of theoretical knowledge of why people participated in terrorism and how terrorism worked.

Could the Minister of Public Safety please update the House on how our government is doing that through the Kanishka project?

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last year our government announced the Kanishka project, which will invest in research on the issue surrounding terrorism. The Kanishka project is named after the Air India flight 182 plane that was bombed on June 23, 1985. Our government has committed a total of \$10 million over five years to the project as a way to honour the memory of the victims.

Yesterday I was proud to announce the first round of projects funded under the program. I look forward to seeing Canada become a world leader on research on the issue surrounding terrorism.

I want to thank the member for his involvement in this project.

*Business of the House***ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS**

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when the NDP shed light on health problems in first nation communities by going to Attawapiskat, Canadians understood how years of government neglect let the problems get worse. Now that it is time to act, the Conservatives gut funding to organizations that provide health information to these communities, like the National Aboriginal Health Organization.

Public health information is important to first nations that have higher rates of chronic disease. For heaven's sake, why is the government taking away the money needed to ensure better health outcomes for first nations?

• (1505)

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I stated before, the members of the National Aboriginal Health Organization wrote me a letter in the fall of last year to wind down the National Aboriginal Health Organization. They requested this, I listened, and that is exactly what we are doing.

* * *

[*Translation*]

CULTURAL HERITAGE

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, although the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment told us yesterday that the government was willing to enter into discussions with the Gaspé community about returning to the Gaspé items belonging to people expropriated in Forillon, nothing has yet been confirmed. All the same, it is novel to see the government open to dialogue.

What is the minister waiting for to put a stop to his plan to store artifacts that are part of the history of Quebec and New France far from their place of origin? He should keep them where they currently are, in the care of experts. And what is good for Forillon is also good for Saint-Maurice, for Fort Saint-Louis and for the Quebec Service Centre.

[*English*]

Hon. Peter Kent (Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I responded to my hon. friend some weeks ago, these historical artifacts do belong in the regions and they belong in places where they are available, not only for the public, but for historians and archeologists to study them. At the moment, there are some challenges with regard to storage space and exhibition space.

I reassure my friend that Parks Canada is working to find appropriate locations in the province of Quebec, as close to their natural locations as possible.

* * *

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of the Honourable Allen Roach, Minister of Innovation and Advanced Learning for Prince Edward Island.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order.

I would like to unequivocally apologize for my loud outburst of laughter during question period upon hearing that the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans was relocating jobs from St. John's to his landlocked riding in Fredericton.

* * *

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there has been much laughter around the House today. I applaud your efforts at seeking to restore decorum. We will do our best on this side not to provide any material to the government that would allow the disruption of the House of Commons. We are doing our best each and every day.

My question for the government House leader is to understand the calendar for the rest of this week and to look through to Wednesday of next week. Also, I believe the government now has in front of it a unanimous consent motion that it will be moving quite shortly and then a second one to follow.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this afternoon, we will continue with the NDP's opposition day motion.

Tomorrow, we will finish report stage on Bill C-31, the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act. Including second reading, this will be the eighth day of debate on the bill, in addition to many committee meetings. As the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism told the House on Tuesday, this bill must become law by June 29.

[*English*]

On Monday, we will resume the third reading debate on Bill C-25, the pooled registered pension plans act. Following question period that day, we will mark Her Majesty the Queen's jubilee and pay tribute to her 60 years on the throne. After that special occasion, we will get back to the usual business of the day, debating legislation. Bill C-23, the Canada–Jordan economic growth and prosperity act, will be taken up at report stage and third reading.

Jumping ahead to next Thursday, we will resume debating Bill C-24, the Canada–Panama economic growth and prosperity act, at second reading. I would also call Bill C-25 that day if the debate does not finish on Monday.

Finally, June 5 and 6 shall be the seventh and eighth allotted days, both of which will see the House debate motions from the NDP.

Business of the House

I can confirm notice of a motion for unanimous consent regarding the private member's bill, Bill C-311. This is the bill to amend the Importation of Intoxicating Liquors Act that the NDP filibustered the other day. I understand the NDP has now agreed that was a mistake and it is willing to allow it to proceed to a vote at this time. Therefore, we anticipate we will be consenting to that motion to undo the damage that the NDP unwisely did when it filibustered the bill previously.

* * *

• (1510)

IMPORTATION OF INTOXICATING LIQUORS ACT

(Bill C-311. On the Order: Private Members' Business)

May 29, 2012—Third reading of Bill C-311, An Act to amend the Importation of Intoxicating Liquors Act (interprovincial importation of wine for personal use)—the Member for Okanagan—Coquihalla.

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if you seek it, I believe you would find unanimous consent for the following very worthwhile and sobering motion. I move:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Orders or usual practice of this House, the motion for the third reading of Bill C-311, An Act to amend the Importation of Intoxicating Liquors Act (interprovincial importation of wine for personal use), standing on the order of precedence on the order paper, be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Wednesday, June 6 at the end of government orders.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, if you seek it, I think you would unanimous consent for the following motion regarding Syria. I move: That the House continue to support measures which: (a) condemn the brutal massacre of Syrian civilians by government forces in clear violation of earlier commitments; (b) call for an immediate end to the violence, especially the attacks on civilians; (c) support the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and Arab League efforts to establish a ceasefire and implement the six-point peace plan; (d) call for unrestricted access to the country for the international media; (e) support the government's decision to expel Syrian diplomats in protest to the latest atrocities in Syria; (f) call on the international community to speak with one voice in clearly and categorically condemning the violence and working to bring about a complete cessation of hostilities; (g) urge the leadership of China and Russia to play an active and decisive role in achieving an effective ceasefire that saves the lives of innocent civilians, as well as negotiating a road map to reforms that respond to the democratic aspirations of the Syrian people; (h) increase Canada's humanitarian aid to refugees and to internally displaced persons fleeing violence in Syria; and finally, (i) stand in solidarity with those who aspire for peace, democratic governance and the protection of human rights.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, before the question gets put, I should say that this has been a matter of some negotiation between the parties. I am not advised that it has been finally concluded. I

would appreciate it if we could have an opportunity to finally conclude this as between the parties.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, I would seek a moment to table the motion and to confer with the other side.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Mr. Speaker, while we are on the subject of the crisis in Syria, given all our concerns for the situation, I would propose the following motion: That a take note debate on the subject of the ongoing and reprehensible violence in Syria pursuant to Standing Order 53.1 take place this evening, May 31, and, notwithstanding any Standing Order of usual practices of the House, when the House begins proceedings under the provisions of Standing Order 53.1 on Thursday, May 31, no quorum calls or requests for unanimous consent or dilatory motion shall be received by the Speaker, and any member rising to speak during the debate may indicate to the Speaker that he or she will be dividing his or her time with another member.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

An hon. member: No.

Hon. Peter Van Loan: Mr. Speaker, again, this is a matter that has been the discussion of some parties. In fact, it was initiated by the government and the Liberal Party members were originally opposed to a debate on Thursday night. They wanted it to be a different night, so I am a little puzzled by that.

I would like an opportunity for us to again come to a discussion and an understanding that everybody is on the same page before we start launching motions without consensus.

• (1515)

Mr. Marc Garneau: Mr. Speaker, in response to the comment by the House leader for the government, I want to make it categorically clear that we were not opposed to having this take note debate. That is why I am getting up today and asking for it to take place tonight.

The Speaker: Perhaps the House leaders would like to get together to sort out some of these issues and then come back and seek consent for these motions after they have had a chance to do that.

[Translation]

Mr. Jean-François Fortin: Mr. Speaker, the comment I would like to make is about the unanimous consent that has just been asked for.

You will have noticed my comment that the Bloc Québécois was not in agreement with the unanimous consent. I make no judgment about the basis for the motion; it is just that we were not consulted before the motion was moved in the House.

[English]

The Speaker: Fortunately, members have plenty of time today to sort out some of these differences and come back and seek consent once they have had a chance to do so. Therefore, we will move on to orders of the day.

*Business of Supply***GOVERNMENT ORDERS**

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: The hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles has seven minutes left.

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to resume my speech on the official opposition motion.

As I was mentioning, 26% of employment insurance claims are filed by seasonal workers, 30% of whom are Quebeckers. The NDP tells these workers that they are important and that the employment insurance program has to reflect that reality. Unfortunately, the Conservative government does not want to send these workers that same message.

The spokesperson for Mouvement Action-Chômage in the Gaspé, Gaétan Cousineau, who has been defending seasonal workers for 20 years, is speaking out against the government's proposed changes to employment insurance. He is criticizing the abuse of society's poorest workers. He said:

A worker in the Magdalen Islands was offered four jobs on the mainland. He was told, "They are in your region." Do they think that a seasonal worker can take a plane to work a job that far [200 kilometres] from home?

The worker in question was able to turn down the job offer. Would the minister's new regulation have allowed him to do that? We do not know.

It irks me when I hear the Conservative government suggest that seasonal workers are abusing the system.

The reality is that Canada has 3.2 million part-time workers, 20% of the entire workforce, and 1.8 million temporary workers. This type of insecure work is constantly on the increase because of this government's inability to create good jobs and to properly regulate the job market.

I will not accept fingers being pointed at workers who are struggling to make ends meet, certainly not when the finger is being pointed by one who did not see the 2008 economic crisis coming and who has just brought down a budget that contains no real measures designed to stimulate employment.

It also must be pointed out that, since separate accounting for the employment insurance program was established in 1986, the federal government has not put one cent into it. All the benefits, and the program's administrative costs, are paid for entirely by employees and employers.

Despite the fact the government has put nothing in for years, both Liberals and Conservatives have been pilfering from the fund to pay for other programs.

We all know the scheme. They keep premiums higher than the program requires and they reduce benefits and restrict access to the program in order to generate huge surpluses. More than \$50 billion has been siphoned off in that way while today, scarcely one unemployed person in two has access to employment insurance

because of the ever-stricter conditions. By comparison, in 1989, 85% of unemployed people had access to employment insurance.

So the government had better not try to tell me that seasonal workers are threatening the viability of the employment insurance program. If there is a threat, it comes from the Liberals and Conservatives who have had their sticky fingers in the employment insurance fund for decades.

The *Journal de Québec* editorial writer Jean-Jacques Samson feels that the proposed reforms will have the opposite effect to what is intended:

Seasonal work is highly concentrated in the regions, where travel costs are high: distances are long and public transportation is virtually non-existent. Forcing an EI claimant who was earning \$15 an hour to accept a job an hour away from home, and at 70% of his previous salary, constitutes a disincentive to work. His hourly wage would fall to \$10.50, which is barely above minimum wage...and he would have to pay what it costs to travel tens of kilometres.

People will have a strong temptation to turn to social assistance, and returning to the workforce will become very difficult later on.

Job instability should instead incite the government to improve the legislation so that workers can continue to live decent lives during tough times. I actually polled my constituents about this in March. Some 50% of people in Rivière-des-Mille-Îles believe that the existing employment insurance system does not really meet the needs of people who have lost their jobs and that changes need to be made to the system. This poll clearly shows that this government is out of touch with the priorities of our constituents.

Over the years, the NDP has proposed several changes that would improve the EI system. I would like to congratulate my hon. colleague from Acadie—Bathurst, who has done a tremendous job on this issue in the past.

I want to focus in particular on the measures we have proposed for seasonal workers. When it comes to employment insurance, seasonal workers have four problems.

● (1520)

It is difficult for them to accumulate enough hours to qualify for employment insurance. It is difficult for them to accumulate enough hours to be entitled to enough weeks of benefits to get through to the next season. That is known as the black hole. The wage replacement rate is too low because of the short weeks that sometimes occur during the qualifying period. The program imposes a two-week unpaid waiting period.

During the last election campaign, the NDP made a formal commitment to restore the integrity of the employment insurance program to the extent possible given public finances. We said we would eliminate the two-week waiting period, reduce the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours of work, regardless of the regional unemployment rate, and increase the wage replacement rate from 55% to 60%, which is what it was in 1990. We also said we would base the benefit rate calculation on the best 12 weeks of the qualifying period to exclude small weeks caused by circumstances such as bad weather.

Business of Supply

These are not new proposals. In 2001, following extensive consultations, the members of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities unanimously adopted a report recommending these very measures.

Let us be clear: despite the government's rhetoric, the purpose of these changes is not to match unemployed workers with existing jobs, but rather to reduce costs by cutting wages.

The government has to stop dividing Canadians and pitting the regions of the country against each other. It is time to improve the employment insurance program, not destroy it.

Consequently, for the reasons I have just stated, I urge my colleagues in this House, regardless of party affiliation, to vote for the official opposition's motion respecting employment insurance.

Lastly, it should be noted that the employment insurance changes will have a disproportionate impact on women, who often earn lower wages than men and who are more likely to accept lower-paid jobs. When we talk about employment insurance changes, we are also talking about changes that will affect Canadian women and families and have a disproportionate impact on workers in eastern Canada and in Quebec who work in agri-food, forestry, tourism and other industries.

We in the NDP believe that the government must introduce measures to improve the quality of life of working Canadians. However, instead of that, this Conservative government is taking part in a race to the bottom. Unfortunately, that is not the best thing for Quebec families.

[English]

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, throughout the day today we have been subjected to a lot of misinformation in this whole discussion. In a previous comment, my colleague said that our government made \$52 billion of EI funds disappear. I want to clarify that the \$52 billion had disappeared long before this government took office. In fact, it was in the period of the Liberal government prior to us that the \$52 billion disappeared somewhere into general revenues.

More troubling is the insinuation that it is somehow worse for someone to have a job earning 70% or 80% of their previous earnings than sitting at home getting 55% of previous earnings.

Could she explain how ordinary Canadians who are paying EI premiums would feel about people staying home and earning 55% of their earnings rather than getting a job, feeling productive, having self-esteem with a good job and actually contributing to the Canadian economy?

• (1525)

Ms. Laurin Liu: Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party can point the finger at previous governments, but that does not change the fact that EI belongs to Canadians and workers and not to the government. We are faced with a government that does not consult provinces, has not consulted taxpayers and Canadians concerning changes to EI and has tried to bundle all these changes into an omnibus budget bill that is more than 400 pages, which is insulting to the democratic process

and does not allow MPs to carry out their role of oversight and surveillance.

[Translation]

It must also be noted that this government is displaying an arrogant attitude toward Canadian and Quebec workers. Employment insurance is a program that belongs to Canadian workers, not to this government, which is disregarding those workers and accusing them of fraud.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we must recognize that there are literally tens of thousands of seasonal jobs of many different variations. These are good jobs that Canadians have depended on for many years. What the government has done is it has gone through the back door on Bill C-38 and has tried to make significant changes that will destroy lives, that will cause a great deal of anxiety for not only the individuals directly affected, but also for their family members.

Would the member provide her thoughts with regard to how this will be damaging for many smaller rural communities in particular that are very dependent on seasonal industries for their survival?

Ms. Laurin Liu: Mr. Speaker, let us be clear. The changes to employment insurance are a direct attack on Canadian workers and they are a direct attack on regions in Canada that rely heavily on tourism and on seasonal workers.

[Translation]

I would like to report the remarks made by Maria Recchia, executive director of the Fundy North Fishermen's Association. She said that if Canadians, particularly youth, could not find temporary jobs and were forced to leave the province to find full-time employment, there would not be enough fishermen to ensure the industry's survival.

That quite accurately sums up the problem that the changes pose for these regions, these workers and these businesses.

[English]

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I listened with interest to the many good points made by the member. Would she agree with me that this is an attack not just on workers, but it is an attack on small and large businesses across Canada that provide important minerals, wood, fish, agricultural products and that this will disempower rural Canada and increase the urbanization of Canada? It has broad implications beyond the individual but severe effects.

Ms. Laurin Liu: Mr. Speaker, it definitely does impact rural Canadians and rural industries. It impacts our workers in the east and in Quebec.

Something I would also like to mention is the government has spent its time stigmatizing workers and stigmatizing those who are unemployed, notably by dividing them into three categories.

[Translation]

This government is trying to stigmatize workers by putting them in three separate categories: long-tenured workers, frequent claimants and occasional claimants.

Business of Supply

We in the NDP believe that workers should be helped, not stigmatized.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of State (Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency) (La Francophonie), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the comments made by the members of the opposition. I am happy that this motion was moved by the member for Hamilton Mountain. This motion gives members who will have to vote on this subject the opportunity to hear why I believe it should be defeated. This also gives us the opportunity to tell members more about the true nature of this proposed reform of the Employment Insurance Act. Our aim is simply to improve the program for workers who have unfortunately lost their jobs or who live in a part of the country where the economy is usually based on seasonal work.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to say that I will be sharing my time with the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities.

I cannot believe some of the comments I have heard from opposition members about this proposal. I am trying to figure out what they are doing and I tell myself that what we are seeing in the House with respect to this motion is irrefutable proof that demagoguery is born from a thirst for power. They are using this proposal to engage in name-calling and make all sorts of allegations against the government to try to gain support from who knows who. At the end of the day, the employment insurance program is there to protect Canadians who lose their jobs through no fault of their own and to support them while they search for a new job.

The proposed reform does not change anything about the fundamental obligation that is already in the act. Someone who loses their job and has contributed to the plan is entitled to receive benefits throughout the period set out in the act and regulations. However, during this period, this person is required to search for a job.

What we are really trying to do here is take additional measures to help people who unfortunately have lost their jobs to return to work more quickly. I cannot imagine how someone could be opposed to a reform that will help people get back to work more quickly.

What does getting a job faster mean in real life? No one can deny the following fact. There is no necktied socialist opposite, no Liberal or Bloc member who can deny the fact that, at any given time, an individual will earn a higher income from work than through EI benefits. So finding measures that will match unemployed workers up with available jobs so that they can have a higher income is to their advantage and that of their families, the regional economy, their provinces and the country as a whole.

● (1530)

I cannot fathom why anyone would be opposed to the fact that we are trying to help people who lose their job through no fault of their own to improve their situation. I cannot possibly imagine why we would want to perpetuate a system that deprives those workers of knowledge that would allow them to find and get a new job.

We are talking about seasonal workers. In my riding of Madawaska—Restigouche, in northern New Brunswick, many of our workers—although not the majority—are employed in the forestry, construction and agri-food sectors. Because of our climate, they are seasonal workers by default. The government is not

proposing to reduce the benefits they will receive. All we are saying is that if, in our region, in my community, there are jobs available and those people have the required skills, they can work in those jobs. Some people are upset and say that workers will be forced to accept jobs that pay only 70% of what they were paid in their previous jobs. The fact remains that 70% of their previous salary is still more than what they would receive in employment insurance benefits. Thus, the individuals, their families and the region will be better off.

Why are some people against that? I do not understand. They say that it is an attack on seasonal workers. That is absolutely not true. All we are doing is improving the information system that is in place to provide information about available jobs to recipients, including job offers that will be sent online. Some are saying that not everyone has a computer. Just because they do not have a computer does not mean that their EI will be cut off. This is just a way of helping EI recipients who are looking for work to find out where the jobs are.

We realized—and you have to talk to people in our communities to come to this conclusion—that many employment insurance claimants who were looking for work were going to Service Canada offices, but those offices did not have any information available about where to find these jobs. In some regions of the country—fortunately not in my region—whether it be in western, central or eastern Canada, there are employers who are looking for employees with a certain skill set and cannot find them because the system does not provide a way to match available jobs with qualified workers. The result is that employers have to call upon temporary foreign workers. Imagine a community where, in a given month, people are filing claims for benefits while employers in that same community are submitting applications to hire temporary foreign workers.

In summary, the EI reform will improve the situation of workers across the country. It will benefit our families and our economy. For these reasons, I intend to vote against the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain's motion.

● (1535)

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the government often says that it holds public consultations to get people's opinions. I would like to ask the hon. member, who is from New Brunswick, whether he spoke to small and medium-sized business owners in his riding who depend on seasonal workers about the government's proposed changes to employment insurance.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Mr. Speaker, the answer is yes.

Business of Supply

Just about 10 days ago, I was in my riding and, as I usually do when I am back home, I met some of my constituents while I was out and about in the riding.

That morning, I met a contractor who came up to me as I was leaving a Tim Hortons. He said, "Finally." I asked him what he meant. He said that he was referring to the EI reforms. This contractor has five employees. He told me that, last fall, at the beginning of the winter, he won a contract to build a nice big house. He called his employees, who were on employment insurance, to have them come back to work and they refused. He is a small contractor and he had jobs available.

The member could consult small and medium-sized businesses. Unfortunately, we have to admit that this occurs everywhere in Quebec, in Atlantic Canada, out west and in central Canada.

It does not happen all the time, but it does happen. I met a young woman in my riding who simply told me that if she could receive information about available jobs from Service Canada, or the manpower centre as it was called back then, she would thank us because it would help her family.

• (1540)

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for the minister to stand in the House and accuse the mover of this motion of having a thirst for power leading to demagoguery is crazy. This is a government whose ideology is increasing poverty in this country, and the policies of this government are going to increase unemployment. The latest action in my area, in Prince Edward Island, of the minister responsible for ACOA with regard to closing down the economic development organizations is one of the dumbest things the government could do. Those economic development organizations, at hardly any cost, create jobs.

Central Development Corporation, CDC, last year created 130 jobs using local business as a board of directors with small assistance from the Government of Canada. What did that minister do? He cut them off. He cut all that economic development. I would accuse that minister of failing in his responsibility as the Minister of State for ACOA with regard to creating economic development.

What does the minister have to say for himself with regard to increasing unemployment in Atlantic Canada and failing in his responsibilities as minister?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Mr. Speaker, I have been called worse before by better than the hon. member.

He is talking about the employment situation. He should talk about the situation in P.E.I. where he is from. Let us just consider 2011. During 2011 farm cash receipts in P.E.I. increased by 17.5% to \$474 million, along with nearly a 60% increase in non-residential building construction investment throughout the province. That was as a result of our economic action plan.

An. hon. member: Oh, oh!

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: The member may laugh, but he should look in the mirror and maybe he would find something horrific.

The fact of the matter is P.E.I., among Atlantic provinces, is where the jobs lost during the recession have been recovered, and more. We have positive results for P.E.I., and that is surely not because of the mimicry of the member.

[Translation]

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, it is a pleasure for me to take the floor after my colleague to speak about employment insurance reform. What has been interesting since this debate began is the constant misinformation. It is amazing to hear all the outrageous remarks that have been made.

I come from a region. I have been the director general of several tourism organizations. I have spent my life on the ground, in Lac-Saint-Jean. I have known people working in forestry, in tourism and in other industries. Some people who have most certainly never set foot in such organizations now want to teach us a lesson. I find that particularly interesting.

How is the employment insurance fund managed today?

In 2008, our government created the Employment Insurance Financing Board, a totally independent organization whose people make decisions about costs and premiums. When there is a surplus, they decide how to manage it to reduce premiums.

I cannot believe the opposition party is saying that we are doing this to fund government operations. Our government spent \$56 billion. We have been hearing those brazen lies for two weeks now. If they can tell lies about this, what can we expect from them regarding other matters? It is unbelievable.

Before we came to power, the Liberal Party basically emptied the employment insurance coffers, but that will never happen again because there is an organization managing the fund on behalf of all workers and business owners. The fund belongs to employers too.

The official opposition likes to say that the employment insurance fund belongs to workers, but for every dollar contributed by workers, employers pay \$1.40. Employers pay even more than workers.

This fund is for everyone and it gives people access to income so they can support their families during periods of unemployment that are temporary, not permanent.

We are not the only ones calling for this change. The economy is suffering across Canada and in Quebec. There is a worker shortage in many areas that rely on tourism. In some regions of Quebec, restaurants are closing because there are no cooks or servers. That is the point we are at, and we have to deal with the situation, taking into account all of the variables.

Business of Supply

Some members of the House have said over and over that seasonal workers will no longer be entitled to anything. They have also said that seasonal tourism and forestry workers in the regions will lose their jobs if there is no suitable job available in their region. Today they were talking about a one-hour commute. One hour is an average commute time because people in cities who live just 30 km from their workplace often take over an hour to get there.

Add to that personal circumstances: illness, family, lack of a car. However, that is not what we are talking about. That being said, we want the Canadian economy to work well, to continue working well. That means we need workers to do jobs.

In January, the Prime Minister came with us to the regions to participate in round tables, and people from the tourism industry and the forestry sector in our regions told him that there was already a shortage of workers at that time. We are not creating the shortage; on the contrary, we have created 750,000 net new jobs in Canada.

The Leader of the Opposition said recently that 500,000 factory jobs have been lost in the industrial sector. These losses were caused by global market fluctuations. More jobs were lost in the United States. It is not the government's fault. Canada has had a net gain of 750,000 new jobs. Unfortunately, in regions like mine, where 70% of the economy depends on the forestry industry, jobs that have been lost are not coming back. The United States, which buys 50% of our products, has yet to recover enough demand to start building again.

What Canadians want is simply for the economy to continue moving forward in all regions of the country, with respect for all. And if there are no jobs in the regions where there is unfortunately no longer any work available for seasonal workers, they will have employment insurance benefits. I completely agree with that.

We are talking about 70%, but why can they not find a job that pays even more than the job they occupied during the summer or winter, depending on the sector in which they work? People who work for snowmobile clubs work in the winter. Their jobs are seasonal. They do not work in the summer. It depends where they live. We want to make Canada an even better place and we want to continue creating jobs for these people.

In 2008, all the parties were saying that artists would no longer travel, that it would be the end of the world, that young offenders would be put in prison and abused. None of that has happened. Quebec and Canadian artists continued travelling and have remained successful around the world. The opposition is still trying to scare people, as it often does. We will see. We are confident that we will be able to do things right and that we will meet all expectations in this area.

Let us talk about the 360 hours. The employment insurance fund is self-directed. The premiums paid by the employers and the employees are what pay for the employees' benefits. When we talk about 360 hours, we are working with productivity. We want businesses to operate. We do not want more businesses to close their doors. That is always the issue. People think that money grows on trees. That is wishful thinking. I find it rather interesting to hear.

For the past two weeks, I have been hearing that engineers are going to be pumping gas and doctors will be waiting tables in

restaurants. The fearmongering has to stop. There is already a shortage of skilled labour in certain sectors.

• (1545)

There is already a shortage of skilled workers in certain sectors. Headhunters are competing for engineers. All we want is to continue our good work on this and to ensure that our economy runs smoothly. There are a number of measures. What is more, we have introduced a number of new measures to help the self-employed, who were not entitled to employment insurance in the past. Thanks to our government, they are now entitled to it provided that they meet certain criteria and standards.

Naturally, there must be accountability throughout a process like this. In 2009, we were able to help a number of sectors in addition to the self-employed, such as military families, who now have better access to parental leave benefits and employment insurance. The list could be very long.

The thing that matters today is that the goal is not to attack anyone, but to increase the number of jobs and to ensure that Canadians and Canada continue to have high-quality jobs. That is what will allow our businesses to flourish.

At the end of the day, when there are no jobs to offer people, they leave the regions. We have to offer them employment. Some people want to encourage people not to work and to do nothing, but that is not what we want. We want to find jobs for people. If seasonal workers have finished their jobs, they will be entitled to employment insurance, as usual.

• (1550)

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, forgive me if I do not agree with everything the hon. member said.

Last week, when I was in my riding, one thing in particular struck me about this employment insurance reform bill.

Obviously, I was expecting strong and intense reactions from workers, but I also noticed that many employers were questioning—this word is not strong enough—the fact that they will have to invest in training seasonal workers year after year. It is not the employees who do not want to work year-round. The very nature of the job makes it impossible for them to do so.

Employers are afraid that they will have to devote more money to their company's production or productivity since their employees will not be able to return each year if they are obligated to accept another job an hour away that pays only 70% of their usual salary. Employers are saying that this will increase their costs considerably and will also make it harder to find workers.

What does the minister think about that?

Business of Supply

Hon. Denis Lebel: Mr. Speaker, according to the explanation by the member opposite, it is impossible that an employer would be scared to lose an employee who might take a job at 70% of the salary he was earning, a one-hour drive away. People will not accept jobs that involve a permanent 30% pay cut and an hour's drive when they know that they will get their jobs back the following year. That is not what we are saying. What he just said cannot happen.

I have met with many employers. They are looking for stability. They want to train their staff so that the business becomes more profitable and stable, and so that it performs better. This will make the business more profitable. That is what they want and what they hope is the future for their workers.

It does not make sense for an administrative assistant in the tourism industry to lose his job in October, when there is a similar job available in the same city and no one can be found to fill the position, and then for the employer to have to look for someone in another region to fill that position. So we pay that person who just finished their job and is receiving employment insurance.

All we are saying is that we must find a smart balance between available jobs and potential employees.

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is one thing that I do not understand.

It is true that there are jobs available and that people are looking for jobs. It is true that they want to match people on EI to available jobs. If the goal really is to find people to fill available jobs, why does the government simply not conduct an advertising campaign to better inform people about available jobs, without putting this in the law?

Hon. Denis Lebel: Mr. Speaker, an advertising campaign targets the entire population.

As more people are already working, an advertising campaign would not target needs. Those who have lost their jobs have needs. In future, these workers will receive job notices twice a day electronically. There are definitely many changes to employment insurance, changes that are positive and progressive because we are increasing automation in the system. We will increase availability of the information. We believe that workers will find out about everything available in their area much more quickly and completely.

[*English*]

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. minister for his comments. I think he spoke very well to the proposed changes that we would make and also to some of the challenges that we are facing across our country.

I come from a province that is facing the challenges of connecting Canadians to available jobs. I wonder if he could clarify for the members opposite exactly what we are doing that would address this issue.

Hon. Denis Lebel: Mr. Speaker, I will have a chance to be in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, tomorrow to have some discussions about this issue. That is not the main purpose, but there will be some discussions.

We want employees to know what jobs are offered and available. We want to find jobs for people at the best salaries possible in order to help them and their families.

• (1555)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Beaches—East York.

I want to congratulate my colleague from Hamilton Mountain for moving this motion. I am quite pleased and I hope that all members of the House will recognize the importance of this motion and support it because it is essential.

The changes proposed by the government are another attack against the least fortunate in our society. I am talking about people who have lost their job once, twice or perhaps three times, or seasonal workers who need employment insurance benefits. They need those benefits not because they are lazy, but because we have seasons and a climate in Canada that do not allow people to work on farms or in the fisheries 12 months a year.

I repeat, the government is once again attacking the least fortunate in society. It attacked them by increasing the age of eligibility for old age security and the guaranteed income supplement and it is attacking them again with these changes.

With the government's proposed changes, we will lose 60 years of case law that defines suitable employment. Am I the only one who is concerned about this? Are we, on this side of the House, the only ones who are concerned about this?

The local aspect will also be lost. The government is redefining suitable employment, when this should be done by people in the community who really understand what suitable employment is for an individual.

My region is a suburb that is about an hour from Montreal normally, but with traffic, it takes up to three hours to get to Montreal some mornings. The government says that people must accept work that is an hour away from home, but in reality, it may take three hours to get there. This will have a real impact on people's quality of life and that of their families.

Furthermore, the government is attacking seasonal workers. It wants to force them to take jobs at 70% of their current wages because of the nature of their work. Thus, they are going to lose 30% of their income.

Does this government really understand the impact that a 30% loss of income could have on someone or on a family? For some families, this could mean that they can no longer pay their rent. They will be forced to live on the street. Some families are already having a hard time making ends meet. They will have some tough choices to make when they lose 30% of their income. However, the government does not seem to have a problem with imposing these kinds of reforms.

People unlucky enough to lose a job will be forced to take another and lose another 30% of their income. They will end up with even less income. The government is attacking society's least fortunate, those who are unlucky enough to lose their jobs or who work in difficult, seasonal sectors.

Business of Supply

I also wonder about the impact of this measure on these sectors in general. I think that it will be much more difficult to find workers if these measures are applied to seasonal jobs.

People are being told that they will have to find work an hour away from home and that the government will decide what “suitable employment” is. The government is ignoring 60 years of legal precedent here. It will also force people to accept lower wages.

I wonder whether a young person, knowing this, would be at all interested in working in forestry. I doubt it, because there are so many negative factors to consider, like it or not. This move will destroy entire sectors of our economy.

The Conservatives are always talking about how important the economy is, but we are the ones who really understand it. We have to consider things like that, things that will have a negative impact. Everyone wins when people find jobs. I know that; everyone knows that. However, we have to be honest. We have to wake up and realize that there are not enough jobs.

• (1600)

Right now, there are 222,000 jobs and 1,336,000 unemployed workers. It does not take a mathematical genius to figure out that the number of jobs available is much smaller than the number of unemployed workers.

According to the government, the solution is simple. Unemployed workers simply have to find another job. I am sorry, but it is not as simple as that. Unfortunately, it is not easy for parents who have had the misfortune of losing their jobs.

I would also like to point out that the employment insurance fund belongs to taxpayers. Personally, as a worker, I put money aside because, one day, I might have the misfortune of losing my job. I certainly will not be appointed to the Senate like the members of the Conservative Party who lose their jobs.

So, one day, I may lose my job and I will have to file an EI claim. I put some money aside and I expect that money to be available to me when the time comes because I contributed to the employment insurance fund out of my own pocket, as have all Canadians. It is the same as hiding money under the mattress in case of an emergency. A rainy day may come when things are not going so well, and the money will no longer be available. It does not make any sense. We are contributing to the employment insurance fund and the government is making decisions that make our money less available to us. The government is deciding what is best for those who have the misfortune of losing their jobs and for those who are forced to work in a seasonal industry.

I am also wondering about something else. Unless the Conservatives take action on climate change, there may no longer be any seasons. Global warming may occur quickly, but that is another story.

I would like to take a few moments to highlight what the NDP wants. New Democrats believe that people must have access to social programs, programs that will benefit everyone, all Canadians and all Quebecers. We must ensure that employment insurance is both accessible and available. Both criteria are necessary. The

program must be dependable and available when those who have lost their jobs need to use it.

An NDP government would extend stimulus measures until the unemployment rate drops to pre-recession levels. It would eliminate the two-week waiting period, restore the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours of work, independent of the regional rate of unemployment. It would increase benefits to 60% and improve the quality and monitoring of training and retraining.

I would like to take a few more seconds to talk about what is happening in our ridings. Unfortunately, I meet with many people in my riding office who are at the end of their rope and are crying. They tell me that they have lost everything and do not know what to do. They are no longer receiving employment insurance and have nothing. These people have families. What are they going to do?

If such changes persist, I fear there will be more and more people at the end of their rope, with no hope. They no longer have any hope for this country or this government. Nonetheless, I would like to tell them not to despair because in three years, the NDP government will listen to them and implement decent systems and social programs that Canadians can use.

• (1605)

[English]

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for her speech and comments, as well as for elaborating a bit on the local level.

When she talked to some of the points in her speech, I wondered if she has read some of the outlines for the reforms we will be talking about, because the fact is that in places of high unemployment where there are no jobs, EI is going to be there.

Then she talked about something that is very important, that being that the unemployed people who need it will get it. That is very simple. We have said that.

She also said that it is the employees' money. A certain portion of the money that goes into the EI pool is the employees' money, but there is a match on that as well that is made by the employers, which is a multiple of the employees' contributions.

The reforms we are speaking of are about finding jobs for people as well as making sure we have Canadians working before we bring in temporary foreign workers.

I would like to ask her if, when she talks about all the things she would change about the EI program, she has assessed the cost of what that would be. Has she assessed what the additional premiums would be that would be coming out of employees' and employers' pockets to pay for those extra premiums?

[Translation]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for the question.

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The fact is that yes, EI will still be there. However, if a job is available to someone an hour away from home and that job pays 70% of that person's current salary, he or she will be forced to take it whether they want to or not. We have to consider the fact that it might take three hours in traffic at rush hour to get there even though it is only an hour away.

Indeed, EI will still be there. However, if there are other options, if someone can find a job that pays 70% of their salary an hour away, they will have to take it. There is no choice in the matter.

[*English*]

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I commend the hon. member for her speech. It is interesting to hear some of the members from New Brunswick.

I will just give a quick example, and maybe my colleague can comment on it.

Let us say that I own and operate a mill in northern New Brunswick, Cape Breton or anywhere, and the snow is too deep every year so my operator is laid off. That operator says, "I'm not going to get my EI because I'm a repeat offender", so he moves away and operates equipment somewhere else. What happens the following spring? Do I get the fish plant worker that is on EI to operate a \$200,000 machine?

This will cause havoc for the employers out there. They are paying into the system to get these workers, to have reliable and constant workers.

My question to my hon. colleague is this. What does she think about that?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I talked about this in my speech. However, to answer the member's question, I would say that the following must be considered. If someone works in a seasonal sector and is forced to endure these Conservative measures, this will give some sectors and some jobs a negative image. Employers will have to worry about the fact that perhaps someone who has been trained, who is reliable and who returned to work at that company every year, perhaps that person will no longer come back because he or she found a job elsewhere.

[*English*]

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it has been a bit of a quiet afternoon here, but there was an extraordinary moment that I would like to point out and ask my colleague about.

When the minister of state for ACOA was talking about his own riding essentially he said that people on EI in his riding were lazy. I found that fairly offensive. He said that he was talking to somebody who owned a business who had some jobs and some people were on EI and they would not take those jobs. He did not ask the workers why they did not take the jobs. He assumed these workers were lazy; that is what was implied by his comments, that they would not take those jobs.

I think it is important for my hon. colleague to comment on how important it is for us to talk to the workers and the businesses.

● (1610)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Charmaine Borg: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for the question.

Workers who receive employment insurance are not lazy. I think it is truly a disgrace that the government has suggested that in this House and that it is accusing people who have unfortunately lost their jobs, or who have seasonal jobs, of being lazy.

Someone who does not want to take a particular job might have a very good reason. Perhaps the working conditions are inadequate. We cannot ask someone who works in the manufacturing sector with machines all day to go and pick strawberries. That would not be acceptable. That is not suitable employment for someone who works with heavy equipment. Everyone agrees on that.

Honestly, it is a disgrace that this government would say that people who receive employment insurance are lazy. It is truly a disgrace.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Before we resume debate, 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 Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, Housing; the hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, Government Priorities; the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands, 41th General Election.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Beaches—East York

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise in the House today to speak in favour of the motion put forward by my colleague from Hamilton Mountain.

There are many grounds for such a motion, but I want to situate the Conservative government's effort to restrict access to EI in a broader and historical context that is as something that is ruinous for our country, that is harmful to so many of our citizens and that has to be abandoned before we lose sight of the kind of country Canadians hope for and deserve.

In doing so, I want to talk about the very real impacts of these proposed changes on the city in which I live. That is Toronto.

Urban communities have a specificity, which warrants special consideration when we talk about employment insurance, and Toronto has a particular place in this story.

I will begin with this proposition, which I hold to be true and the vast majority of Canadians, irrespective of their own economic status, hold to be true.

If there is a symptom of what ails our country, it is the re-emergence of income disparity. I say "re-emergence" because, yes, we have seen these conditions co-exist before, private affluence and largely public squalor, but many decades ago.

Those who previously recognized the injustice of this, and the generation or two that succeeded them, made great efforts to escape such circumstances by erecting barriers against income disparity.

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Employment insurance was one of those very important barriers erected for this purpose, but now the Conservative government, freed from the constraints of minority government status, is returning us to that place.

To be fair, we have been trending in this direction for a while now. The current government, in many respects, is following in the footsteps of those that came before it. I have spoken in this House a number of times before about how this trend has reshaped my city socially and economically over the last number of decades.

Periodically, this trend seems to be accelerated. Certainly this was done by the savage budget and EI cuts of the Liberal governments in the 1990s. And, certainly it has been accelerated by the corporate tax cut schedule, initiated by the Liberal government, but gleefully picked up, extended and implemented by successive Conservative governments. Now, with the current government and Bill C-38, the foot is firmly planted on the accelerator, hurtling this country downhill, back to a place we wisely made efforts to escape before.

To be sure, it is not all about what is in Bill C-38. Just two nights ago we were all here in this chamber to witness another assault on free collective bargaining, another effort by the Conservative government to undermine the very deliberate, purposeful role that unions play in ensuring the redistribution of corporate surplus to working people and to the creation of a middle class and the consequent revenue base to sustain the kind of goods and services that are properly delivered to Canadians by government; health care and public pensions being the most obvious of these.

The condition of extreme income disparity is certainly a fully Canadian one these days. Canada has the seventh greatest level of income disparity among the OECD's 29 member states, as we know.

However, it is in urban communities in particular that we see affluence and poverty existing cheek by jowl. The condition that afflicts us is most conspicuous by the near and sometimes total absence of infrastructure across great expanses of urban space. We have come to a point in our collective impoverishment where we talk about the existence of food deserts in the city of Toronto.

This social and economic reshaping of our cities reflects dramatically changing labour markets across the country and particularly in Toronto. In the past 10 years, there has been a 59% increase in the number of temporary and contract jobs across the country. These changes have been particularly acute in Toronto, where there has been a 68% increase.

While Toronto had lost well over 100,000 manufacturing jobs before the recession, it has seen a dramatic increase in the number of jobs paying less than \$10 per hour. This has led to the rapid increase of working poor in Toronto.

While the Conservative government has taken the position that there is no such thing as a bad job, let me quote from the Metcalf Foundation's recent report entitled, "The 'Working Poor' in the Toronto Region".

● (1615)

It states:

Although work can provide a ladder out of poverty, this is not always the case. In the Toronto Region, an increasing number of people are both employed and living in

poverty. The highest concentration is found in the city of Toronto. We call them the working poor. They live in a region with the highest cost of living in Canada.... They live in a region with the second most expensive housing market in Canada. In this high-cost environment, earnings from a job – even full-time – may not be sufficient to escape poverty.

Indeed, it is not. What we have seen in the Toronto region is an increase in this population of the working poor of 42% between 2000 and 2005, which again is pre-recession.

Employment insurance has failed to stem this tide of income disparity. What has become clear is that employment insurance rules have not kept up with shifting labour market realities. Professor Leah Vosko expressed this succinctly in her report in support of the Mowat Centre's recent study on employment insurance. She said:

A notable overarching finding is that EI's entry requirements disfavour part-time workers. For instance, in urban areas and metropolises, where entry requirements tend to be highest, more than 50 per cent of workers in this group do not meet the 700 hour threshold.... Insensitivity of regular benefit requirements to the changing nature of employment in this formula contributes to disorientation of workers falling outside the norm of the full-time permanent job in low-unemployment regions where workers in part-time and temporary forms of employment face high entry requirements.

In Toronto, fewer than 25% of unemployed workers are actually eligible for EI benefits. This is far less than the national average for eligibility, which hovers just above 40%, which is a problem in and of itself. It also compares, woefully, to the pre-Liberal reform levels, when 56% of the unemployed workers in Toronto were eligible for EI benefits and nationally were somewhere in the range of 80%.

It is into this context of these social and economic conditions, of people trying to find work, of people working but still in poverty, of people having nothing to catch them when they fall out of work, that the current government sees fit to tighten eligibility for employment insurance to force people into jobs that would not allow them to keep themselves or their families out of poverty.

How does this make any sense? How in the world can this be considered to be wise policy? In whose perverse economics text can one find such prescriptions for building a prosperous society? In whose strange imagination is this reflective of the kind of society we should be building here in Canada?

The fair and just thing for us to do in our role here is to amend EI, but in a manner that would provide meaningful income security to Canadians in all parts of this country in all labour markets when they lose their jobs, in a manner that would allow Canadians to maintain their dignity in the face of misfortune, in a manner that would facilitate and expedite re-entry into meaningful, productive and, yes, good jobs, and in a manner that would build a barrier against that which ails us most in this country these days: income disparity.

These are the kinds of policy criteria that reflect the generous, compassionate and prosperous Canada that Canadians really want us in this place to build.

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•(1620)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague, who described the situation in Toronto so well. Exactly the same thing is happening in Montreal.

I would like my colleague to expand on what happens when someone is not eligible for employment insurance and falls through the cracks in the system. What happens then?

[*English*]

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, this is an important question for consideration by the government when it is contemplating the kind of amendments it is contemplating to EI.

It is important, too, because the story is a common one. As I say, fewer than 25% of unemployed Torontonians are eligible for EI. What they face in Toronto is a life of extreme stress and hardship. This government fails to contemplate, in trying to save money and force people into low-paying jobs, the kinds of economics that understand that it would not be good for this country, it would not be good for government coffers to be forcing people into those positions. It is unhealthy. It would be costly to society. It would be costly to other government programs.

Most of the government programs that it would be costly to, of course, are provincial programs. The sad part in Ontario is that those provincial programs, social assistance, were cut dramatically. Liberal government downloading in the 1990s, to provinces, led to dramatic cuts in social assistance in Ontario. A subsequent Liberal government in Ontario has never done anything about that social assistance either.

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in listening to the member's response in the House and his speech before, I know he methodically approaches his task and does his research.

During the downturn in the economy the unemployment rate was just slightly over 8%, which probably masked the underlying issue of a shortage of labour. As he would well know, there are about a quarter of a million positions open. A lot of the positions are not advertised at job banks or other places. Probably only about 20% of the jobs in Canada are advertised yet a lot of small businesses and others are looking for people.

Could the member give me his comments on some of the things we are thinking about in this reform, where it looks at making investments in helping people match up their skills to those jobs and to get some of those good jobs that are maybe not necessarily advertised? Does he see these investments as positive reform to make sure people have an opportunity to look at those job opportunities to see what might be there to match their skills?

Mr. Matthew Kellway: Mr. Speaker, there are bound to be unadvertised jobs in the labour market and not all employers would put out formal advertisements.

Fundamentally, we have a problem here. According to Statistics Canada there is a job open for every six unemployed Canadians. That is one of the problems with the amendments that the government is proposing. Obviously with so few jobs open, few

unemployed people have an opportunity to find a job, setting aside the issue of good jobs, which is an extremely important issue in the city of Toronto.

Why are we punishing people to find work when the work is not available for them? That is why I do not understand what the government is doing. Those are the statistics. One job is available for every six unemployed people in this country. Those people need help getting new skills. They need support while they are unemployed. What they do not need is a government demonizing them and punishing them for a circumstance which is beyond their control.

•(1625)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Saint-Maurice—Champlain.

I represent a riding with a very mobile workforce. People from Guysborough, Canso, Mulgrave and all through Cape Breton Island have travelled for years to some of the biggest construction projects in North America and around the world. It is very interesting to have an opportunity to share conversations with people at the airport who are travelling to seek employment and ply their trade.

My colleague from Sydney—Victoria just shared a statistic. In 2006 in Cape Breton there were 1,700 workers from Cape Breton employed in Alberta. It was bringing something like \$3 million a week into the local economy. Obviously, there are some social challenges when people are having to travel to work, but certainly it is of benefit to both places. It is of benefit to local communities when they are able to earn that level of income, but it is of benefit to Alberta, Saskatchewan and those provinces that need access to a labour force. Therefore, know full well that I am comfortable with understanding the benefits to both the employers and the employees when a workforce is mobile.

That is not the case in this instance with the changes in regulations. I would like to address them in a couple of different ways. I want to talk about the impact on business; about the department's capacity to really handle these changes, which I call into question; and then whether or not there are better ways to go about it.

First, the impact on business. My good friend from Tobique—Mactaquac had indicated that both employees and employers contribute to the EI fund. The employers in seasonal industries in our communities contribute to this as well. I fear that with the changes in the legislation, it will decimate business operators in seasonal industries. It has the potential to rob them of skilled workers, people who have been with them and provided expertise and services over a long period of time.

I have talked to people in the tourism sector and the forestry sector. They, and obviously people in the fishery, are very nervous about these changes and the potential impacts. I want to read into the record a letter I got from the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. Beth Densmore, the president, has shared her concerns with both the minister and MPs from Nova Scotia.

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First, she makes reference to the fact that the majority of the labour force in the agriculture sector is skilled in a particular profession. It is just that the profession is in a seasonal industry. She says:

We, in the Federation, believe that the proposed changes have not been well thought through and would urge that the Federal Government give greater consideration to the perhaps unintended consequences of such action. Is this simply a way to move the responsibility for the working poor from one level of government (Federal) to another level where the worker's only recourse will be to apply for social assistance (Provincial or Municipal)?

The federation even suggests a possible amendment:

One possible scenario would be to provide an exemption from the proposed EI changes for the resource based industries which depend on a skilled workforce, but, only for a portion of the year.

Maybe that would be something that would make sense. It would certainly alleviate some of the fears that are being put forward by, not just the workers in seasonal industries, but those who operate those businesses and who are really the foundation of rural communities.

•(1630)

In this particular legislation, the government did put \$21 million into a particular program. That is the e-alert program. I think it is worthwhile to make more information about potential for job opportunities available to those who are unemployed. That is a positive thing. Right now the rules are there that it is incumbent on those receiving EI benefits to pursue work opportunities, but I think this is of benefit. It is a fairly hefty cost, but it is of benefit.

However, if the government thinks this is going to solve all the problems, it is not. Forty percent of families with a total household income of \$30,000 or less have no access to the Internet, and 25% in the bracket of between \$30,000 and \$50,000 annual household income have no access to the Internet.

We know that the government has carved the guts out of the community access program that enabled people to go to libraries and community centres to access the Internet. That has been lost now, and what we are doing with these actions is placing greater hardship on those who most need that access.

The burning question that begs to be asked is how the government is going to handle the changes in these regulations. We know that right now approximately 180,000 Canadians have waited over 29 days to receive their first employment insurance cheque. The EI processing centres no longer have the capacity to process these claims. We have seen closures in a number of different areas.

We saw the minister try to shore things up and put a band-aid on it last year by putting 400 people in over the Christmas rush to address this issue, but it remains a problem when 180,000 Canadians have waited over 29 days for their first EI cheque.

I know the minister herself was not very aware. The payment indicator, when correspondence is kicked out to someone who has applied for EI, measures both those who get notice of nonpayment and those who actually receive a cheque; she thought everybody was getting a cheque within that period of time. She thought they were doing famously over there, that everybody was happy and everybody was getting their money.

Actually, it is really hard to take a notice of nonpayment to buy groceries for the kids. Once the minister realized that, she did put some additional resources into the processing centres at Christmas time. Again, it was an interim measure.

Now, with all these regulations, we have to hound and pursue workers and find out if they are chasing down the jobs, whether or not the jobs are deemed suitable. There is nothing in the estimates about more resources being provided to make sure these regulations are concurred with. That should raise an alarm to everybody that we should anticipate further delays in payment of EI benefits to those who have earned and deserve them. I am not that confident there and I see nothing in the estimates for that.

I will close with this. The minister was in Halifax, Nova Scotia, recently. I want to read a quote from her into the record. She said:

Why would we want to bring in people from outside when we have people here who need the jobs and who can do them? It only makes economic sense.

There are 140,000 unemployed people in Alberta. There are 25,000 unemployed people in Saskatchewan. If we put them together, that is more than the number of unemployed people in Atlantic Canada. Would it not make more sense to put money into training for those people, rather than shaking people in Atlantic Canada out of their communities? All that is doing is contributing to the further decline in population in rural communities. I think that is the question I would like to pose to the member today.

I want to thank my colleagues in the NDP for bringing this motion forward to the House today.

•(1635)

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I really enjoyed my colleague's comments, as I always do, and I noted with interest that he was applauding many of the changes, but I have one question for him.

Earlier today one of our colleagues from the NDP commented about the \$52 billion missing from the EI program. I wonder if my colleague, who was in the government at the time, would care to comment as to where the money is.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on that point. When Jean Chrétien came to power in 1993, he inherited a bankrupt EI system. The Auditor General of Canada had instructed the prime minister at that time to put the EI system into general revenues because the unemployment rate then was 12.5%. Under Liberal rule, more jobs were created and the unemployment rate came down to 7.5%. More people were paying in, fewer people were taking out and a surplus was created.

When the Conservatives did away with EI's inclusion in general revenues, they once again created a stand-alone regime, and that system is now \$9 billion in arrears. It is back to the future again. We are back to where we were: \$9 billion in the hole. Here we go again.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his speech. I am not familiar with his riding, but if I am not mistaken, it does include some rural communities.

Our rural communities have trouble accessing the Internet. The government is doing very little to improve digital Internet access. It eliminated the Community Access Program. It took away people's options for accessing the Internet. Obviously, some people cannot afford to pay for Internet service. Yet the government expects people to receive job offers via email. That makes no sense.

I would like my colleague to comment further on that.

[*English*]

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, access to the Internet is not universal. It is available in 85% of communities in the country. Many of the ones that do not have it are rural or remote communities, but that does not make it accessible for people on limited incomes or low-income earners. The cancellation of the funding support for CAP sites has been devastating to those who are trying to make it through, pay bills and raise their families. Again, the \$21 million in the e-alert system should help some people, but it would be of very limited assistance to those who do not have access to the Internet.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, what we are looking at is a stepwise process. The minister says she is not interested in telling people they have to leave the communities where they live, but the government is now creating three different tiers for people, including one I find quite offensive, the idea that there is something wrong with a “repeat user”, because that is actually the foundation for seasonal tourism, seasonal fishery and seasonal forestry.

What I see coming is a shrinking in the number of people available for an appeal. Some bureaucrat somewhere will say, “We think there is suitable work for you”, and if the unemployed person says, “I am afraid I cannot get that job or do that job”, for whatever the reasons are, that person will be cut off. Then the appeal is down for however many thousands of people are appealing, and 75 people will make the decision. Then in another year, the government may come back and say it is going to have to ask people to move farther to find work.

I think this is a progression toward closing down seasonal and remote areas. I would ask my friend for his comment.

• (1640)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, the member speaks from a position of understanding, her family members being restaurateurs back in Cape Breton for a great number of years. I am sure she did not lead too many to harbourside tables in the middle of February.

There is a lack of understanding on the part of the government about the importance of seasonal industries and how they operate. That is what is riddled throughout this legislation, and that is why I will be supporting this motion today.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in Bill C-38, the Conservative government is attacking Canada's employment insurance system. Not content with gutting almost all of our country's social programs, the Conservatives have decided to make yet another reform, without consultation.

Employment insurance plays an essential role in this country by providing a safety net, as flimsy as it may be, to protect against the ups and downs of the market economy. Canada is such a large

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country that fluctuations in the economy generally create some degree of dissonance from one region to another. Thus, the realities of the fisheries on the country's east coast have little to do with those on the west. The same holds true for forestry development and the tourism-related service industry.

We have always been faced with regional disparities, which become less pronounced in periods of prosperity and more pronounced in periods of crisis. Thus, the unprecedented economic crisis that western economies have been experiencing for the past few years has served only to further accentuate the economic difficulties of some regions of Canada. No one here, in this time of crisis, has spoken about maintaining the status quo in applying the Employment Insurance Act. As legislators, members of Parliament in this House are all aware of their responsibilities, which are all the more important in these times of fiscal restraint.

However, questioning the employment insurance system in this time of crisis cannot be done without a minimum amount of consultation with subject matter experts, the political class concerned and the social groups that provide front line, essential services to people who are looking for work.

The Conservative government is forgetting the human tragedies resulting from the loss of employment in the regions. The thousands of unemployed workers who are receiving employment insurance benefits are getting only a fraction of their former salaries, which negatively impacts the resources available for community development.

This most recent EI reform, which attacks labour force mobility and the prerogative of job seekers to use their skills, does not take regional realities into account at all. What is more, the change to the definition of suitable employment ignores the minimum measure of dignity that must be included de facto in this type of program.

We built these programs to help the unemployed and meet the minimum needs of individuals and communities in crisis. Today, the current government is attempting to redefine the relationship between citizens and the state by introducing fundamental ideological messages within these reforms of Canada's social security system. The government does not have the mandate to redefine the role of the state and the social programs that are definitely part of our national identity. Our mandate is to make the country work in spite of the inherent differences resulting, in part, from its vastness.

This employment insurance reform is an attack on seasonal workers, and will force them to move in order to take jobs for which they have few or no qualifications. The government wants to force people, by imposing mandatory wage cuts for the jobs to which they apply, to go into areas of the labour market that are foreign to them. The fisher or forestry worker must now redefine suitable employment and trust an employment insurance system that denies the seasonal economic reality of these industries. The Conservative government is introducing reforms without serious studies of the economic and social consequences.

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By reducing administrative employment insurance appeals, the government is ensuring that any impulse to appeal is nipped in the bud. The government is saying no to consultation and no to appeals.

• (1645)

On the east coast, in Quebec and the Maritimes, large sectors of our economy are subject to seasonal employment rules.

The Conservatives' announcement on EI reform upsets an already precarious balance for the people working in the fishery, forestry and tourism. Failing to consult local decision-makers, economists, the opposition and social groups about this reform shows the Conservatives' lack of sensitivity toward the regions and reveals beyond a doubt their ideological rigidity that draws on theories from another century that are no longer current in a complex and ever-changing world.

Changing employment insurance without consulting the local communities is contemptuous and disregards the historic reality of this country and its regions.

We cannot forget the successive structural crises that have affected our fisheries and our forestry and held them hostage in the international regulatory no man's land for which the Conservatives have such an affinity.

Legislating the changes proposed by the Conservatives without consulting Canadians is symptomatic of a government that relies blindly on market forces.

We have a duty to bring in reforms, because the government must be the people's watchdog when it comes to crises that shake up the world every so often. We must bring in these reforms while remaining focused on restoring regional economies, which have been abandoned by this government, which still believes in the principle of natural justice at a time when government intervention is crucial to social cohesion.

In closing, I would remind the members opposite that our economic performance today and our national security depend heavily on a government that engages with its people and its institutions. Believing that these EI reforms will fix regional inequalities and give jobs to the unemployed is magical thinking.

Before making any changes to the EI system, the Conservatives have a moral obligation to help rebuild the regional economies that have been devastated by globalization, technological changes and environmental degradation. The proposed EI reforms are unequivocal proof of this government's lack of vision and realism. Furthermore, this reform could deprive regional economies of the temporary foreign workers needed to work in seasonal industries.

This extremely symbolic displacement of workers forced to apply for jobs within a one-hour commute of their homes will affect the structure of seasonal employment in the regions. Without a doubt, we need to examine the costs involved in this kind of reform, by highlighting the real economic contribution that seasonal jobs make to our communities, and to work on creating economic programs that will support local economies.

[*English*]

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with some interest to the end of my colleague's

speech. In light of her own party's record on employment insurance cuts through the 1990s, how can she justify those today?

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: The world has changed since the 1990s. It is different. The economic situation and the employment insurance situation were both different. My justification has nothing to do with it. In the 1990s, we had not gone through the economic crisis that we have now gone through. Our problems are different. They have nothing to do with each other.

That question has nothing to do with what I said.

[*English*]

Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have listened to several speakers in the last while, and it amazes me that they keep fearmongering about the seasonal employment issue. They know full well that is what they are doing. However, if they had taken any time to read what has been brought forward, they would know these are reasonable measures.

We are not asking people to move from one side of the country to the other side of the country. Places that have issues with high unemployment are not going to be affected at all by this. These people will still be able to continue to claim EI.

I would like for one of the members opposite to stand and explain to me why they figure they are doing justice to Canadian workers, who need to be supported and to find jobs and would like to find jobs, by fearmongering and scaring them as if we are going to make them move from one side of the country to the other. The members know full well that is not the truth.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Mr. Speaker, that is not what I was talking about. I never said that there is no need for employment insurance reform. I said that the proposed reform was developed without consultation. Without consultation, the government's solution is nothing but its personal take on the situation. It does not take the regions into account.

Yesterday we talked about co-operatives. Co-operatives create employment, and that has nothing to do with the 750,000 jobs that have been created. It is great that 750,000 jobs have been created, but the proposed changes to employment insurance will not solve the problems of people in the regions. That is all I am saying. If the government had consulted with people in the regions, it would have understood the situation. Municipalities are dying. Nobody lives there anymore. Towns will have to be shut down. The government's proposal is like saying that, since these people do not have jobs, the municipality will have to be shut down, and they will have to move somewhere else so they can get jobs.

Is that what the government is suggesting with its proposal?

[*English*]

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain for taking on the Conservatives and the NDP for its questions.

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My question for her is about rural Quebec. We know from the Atlantic caucus what this will do for seasonal industries. The member talked about the depopulation that would happen in many rural communities. How will depopulation affect rural Quebec, whether that be in the Gaspé area, or northern Quebec or many rural areas there?

[Translation]

Ms. Lise St-Denis: Mr. Speaker, how is this employment insurance reform going to solve the rural problem? I do not see how it will. We are all working hard in our ridings to find solutions to help people find work. Co-operatives are one example of that. I am from a region that was once prosperous because of forestry. All of the jobs in that sector have been lost. I do not see how the government's proposal will help solve the problem of poor people who do not have jobs.

• (1655)

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there have been discussions among the parties, and if you were to seek it, I believe you would find unanimous consent for the following motion:

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the Member for Hamilton Mountain, all questions necessary to dispose of the motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to Monday, June 4, 2012, at the expiry of the time provided for Government Orders.

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Does the hon. member for Hull—Aylmer have unanimous consent to propose the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

[Translation]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by saying that I have the honour of sharing my time with the hon. member for LaSalle—Émard.

Today we are discussing the motion regarding the proposed changes to the employment insurance system. This motion is a wonderful initiative from my colleague from Hamilton Mountain. This issue is very important to the people in my riding of Chambly—Borduas, who are concerned for many reasons that I will list today.

The first reason is that the changes will require daily proof of job searches. At the same time, job seekers will receive job offers via email. I addressed this issue earlier by asking a question to my colleague, but I would like to discuss it a little more.

In my riding, one of the municipalities, Marieville, is experiencing a problem that many citizens and even the mayor, Alain Ménard, have had the opportunity to tell us about. It is a matter of access to the Internet. This is not a rural municipality; it borders the greater Montreal metropolitan area, on the south shore. People have noticed a big problem. They have tried to get help from the CRTC to improve digital Internet services in the region. Increasingly, different

types of Internet services are being required, and people in rural areas have a hard time accessing them. This is particularly true in Marieville, which is in my riding.

The reason why this is relevant here is that, as I said, we are talking about sending job offers by email, but not everyone has access to the Internet. It goes without saying that, often, people who have lower-paying, less stable jobs—which is often the case for people who are receiving employment insurance benefits—cannot necessarily afford Internet access, even if they live in urban areas where Internet access is easy to obtain. It is therefore hard to see how these job offers will help people.

It is said that people who cannot afford to pay for Internet access can go to the municipal library, for example. However, this presents another problem that was again pointed out to me by the people of my riding and that has to do with the municipal library in Saint-Basile-le-Grand, where I live and where my office is located.

The municipal library offers excellent services, but, unfortunately, it is going to have to reduce the services and Internet access it provides as a result of cuts to the community access program. This was an excellent program that was renewed every year in the budget. It did not just help community organizations, but also municipal libraries. These are very important tools for young people and people with low incomes who cannot always afford such luxuries.

When cuts were made to this program and this service was reduced, once again, people found themselves in a situation where they have one less way of accessing the Internet. This is one of the problems. When we look at the problems this is creating in my riding, we can see why these changes are of such great cause for concern.

The other situation, which my colleagues have addressed many times today in the House, and which I will address again to discuss how it applies to my riding, is seasonal work in tourism, agriculture and other areas. Workers in these sectors have to rely on employment insurance during the off season, especially in tourism, which is very significant in my riding. I am thinking about the city of Chambly, where one attraction is Fort Chambly, a Heritage Canada-recognized site run by Parks Canada. Many tourists from across Canada come to see it. From what we heard in the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage a few weeks ago, it is one of the most visited Parks Canada sites in the region and in Quebec during the summer.

• (1700)

Jobs there are filled by seasonal workers, who work in tourism of course because many of the tourism programs do not operate during the winter.

These people will not only have to look for another job, but they will have to accept a job that pays less than Parks Canada has been paying them at Fort Chambly.

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What is more, in the same bill, the Trojan Horse that is Bill C-38, the government also proposes cuts to Parks Canada that will cause even more problems at Fort Chambly. They knew for weeks that there would be significant cuts to this heritage site in my riding.

This heritage site is suffering a double whammy, not to mention the negative impact on the employees who work at this site during the summer season.

Aside from tourism, there is also agriculture. Although my riding is located between urban and rural regions, on the south shore of Montreal, there are still some farmers in my riding. The work they do is extremely important. This work is very interesting, because it is focusing on sustainable development. These people will have to cut back on their work in this extremely important field for environmental reasons. Their system will have to be completely transformed in light of the proposed changes. I am thinking in particular of wine producers and all kinds of agricultural producers who are not necessarily in my riding but who are in the greater Montérégie area. This will have a negative impact on them.

Incidentally, up until now, I have focused mainly on employers—people who provide services. We often hear that workers have contributed to this system and that they are entitled to use it, but the employers have also contributed to this system and have the right to be defended.

Therefore, it is important to point out that employers will also be punished by the proposed changes. Some will have to close their doors or points of service because the people they depend on to do the work will not return to their former jobs if they are forced to look for other seasonal jobs. At some point, workers will want a certain amount of stability.

If I leave my seasonal job for minimum wage work that is more regular, as required by these changes, it is hard for me to see why I would jump from job to job. This will also punish employers. I believe that it is very important to point this out.

Many business people came to my office to see me this past week, after these changes were announced. Before I am told that it is not true, I would like to give a specific example. I had the opportunity to speak with Ms. Larose, whose husband, Mr. Bêlisle, owns a company in Mont-Saint-Hilaire, in my riding, and employs six seasonal workers. The company is called Irrigation Pro-Jet and it will have to close if the proposed changes are introduced. That is the perspective of one businessman.

Small and medium-sized businesses will be adversely affected, and workers will also be negatively impacted.

It is extremely important to point out the negative impact this will have on small and medium-sized businesses and on employers. I hope I have refuted the specious argument that we do not defend employers' interests. It is in their interests as well to prevent these changes.

That is why I am proud to support the motion of my colleague from Hamilton Mountain and to oppose these illogical changes that are harmful to our society.

• (1705)

Mr. Tarik Brahmî (Saint-Jean, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the hon. member for Chambly—Borduas on his excellent presentation.

I am from Saint-Jean, the riding next to Chambly—Borduas, and I know how much the tourism industry in that riding has suffered as a result of the flooding in 2011, as has my riding of Saint-Jean.

I would like the hon. member to explain how this change to the Employment Insurance Act will add salt to the wound. Not only has this riding been affected by floods, but, as my colleague mentioned, the cuts to Parks Canada will affect the wonderful Fort Chambly site, which is an important national historic site, as my colleague said.

How will this change to employment insurance put even more pressure on seasonal jobs?

Mr. Matthew Dubé: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague and neighbour for his question.

He raised an excellent point. Several factors have had a negative impact in my region. Obviously, the floods were unavoidable. I am still impressed by the people in my community who rallied even when they did not get the help they expected. Fortunately, our region and our communities are strong.

That being said, as the member mentioned, in addition to the cuts included in this Trojan Horse bill, the government will cause even more problems in the tourism sector. Parks Canada is not the only tourism stakeholder in the region. All of the local businesses offer more services during the busy season. There are even seasonal restaurants because that time of the year is so much busier. Things are much quieter at other times of the year.

Clearly, several factors will have negative repercussions in the long term, as my colleague said. That is why we have to oppose this measure.

The government is missing the big picture because all of the changes will really have a negative impact on people in my region.

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to speak to the motion by the member from Hamilton Mountain, which condemns the changes to employment insurance.

Since the May 2, 2011, election, I have held a privileged position because I am an observer of the government's actions from inside this Parliament. The current government has not necessarily demonstrated leadership and vision. It is more of a bean-counting government, although I have absolutely nothing against accountants, far from it. This government will take stock, take the budget and mark all the places where it will make cuts. I find that there is a lack of vision and leadership.

Over the years, Canada has put in place a social safety net so that no one in this beautiful and great country is abandoned. During the election campaign, and afterwards, I had the opportunity to meet the people in my riding of LaSalle—Émard.

Let me paint a picture. Over the years, the industrial park has gradually cleared out. Walking along Saint-Patrick Street, one would see many buildings for lease, buildings that used to house businesses. These businesses have shut down and gone away. That is the reality: industrial parks in Quebec and the rest of Canada have changed considerably.

Large corporations that used to hire hundreds of workers have been transformed and have moved everything out, making room for smaller businesses. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it means that fewer workers are needed. As a result, some workers who used to work for those large corporations and earned good salaries are now unemployed. These are unfortunate circumstances, which everyone hopes are temporary. That is why employment insurance was created. We wanted to have measures to deal with such changes whenever big economic or industrial fluctuations occur in order to ensure that families could continue to live decently when they are hit by layoffs or job losses. I think any good, responsible government has such a duty.

We can see how things have changed over the years, particularly in my riding. Manufacturing jobs, which in general were well paid, stable and long term, have been mainly replaced by far less stable, minimum wage jobs, often putting people at the mercy of the service industry's needs. This industry is cyclical by nature and experiences ups and downs.

• (1710)

That is why I support the motion that was put forward. This government is more of an accountant than a visionary. It does not want to govern for all Canadians, and so the changes it wants to make to employment insurance will fail more and more Canadians and, once again, increase the gap between the rich and the poor.

That is why I am rising to support the motion of the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain.

• (1715)

[English]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:15 p.m., pursuant to an order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Monday, June 4, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

Mr. Harold Albrecht: Mr. Speaker, I ask that you see the clock at 5:30.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Is there consent to see the clock at 5:30?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure whether I want to see the clock at 5:30. Is there not 15 minutes left on this debate?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): No. The time allocated for the business of supply today ended at 5:15. The vote was deferred by a motion made a little while ago rather than at this time. If the clock is not seen at 5:30, then we suspend.

Is there consent to see the clock at 5:30?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Private Members' Business

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

FOOD AND DRUGS ACT

The House resumed from April 4 consideration of the motion that Bill C-313, An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act (non-corrective contact lenses), be read the third time and passed.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I continue to support Bill C-313 from the member for Sarnia—Lambton. Bill C-313 has received support from all parties.

As we all know, the bill is aimed to classify non-corrective contact lenses according to subrule 2(1) of part 1 of schedule I of the Medical Devices Regulations, which states:

Subject to subrules (2) to (4), all invasive devices that penetrate the body through a body orifice or that come into contact with the surface of the eye are classified as Class II.

I also thank the hon. member for being very open to amendments and suggestions at the committee stage of the bill. In fact, there was an amendment that very much improved her bill, which was that it would be best to classify the non-corrective contact lenses as a device under the Food and Drugs Act as opposed to a medical device. The member agreed to that.

I want to congratulate the member and her bill has the support of the Liberal Party because we believe in sound, evidence-based policy, and this bill would do exactly that. I thank the member for continuing to pursue this. I look forward to its passage.

I had hoped that it would have been in the budget, but, alas, that was too much to hope for.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in the House and not only speak to Bill C-313 but also to offer the support of the official opposition, the New Democratic Party, to the proposed legislation.

This enactment will amend the Food and Drugs Act to deem that a non-corrective cosmetic contact lens is a medical device for the purposes of the act. This enactment will ensure that non-corrective contact lenses are subject to the requirements of the Food and Drugs Act and the medical devices regulations.

Private Members' Business

Corrective contact lenses are classified and regulated as medical devices under the Food and Drugs Act and are regulated as class II medical devices by Health Canada. Despite the fact that the health risks are identical to corrective lenses, cosmetic or non-corrective contact lenses are not classified as medical devices and are not regulated by Health Canada. In other words, under federal and provincial law, it currently is permissible to sell cosmetic lenses in any retail establishment without a prescription.

There is, however, an abundance of evidence and research concerning the potential dangers of using cosmetic contact lenses improperly and without professional involvement.

Bill C-313 would amend the Food and Drugs Act to classify cosmetic contact lenses as class II medical devices, the same category as regular corrective lenses. This is a first step that would require all cosmetic lenses sold in Canada to be licensed through Health Canada and for distributors of the products to require a medical device establishment licence.

The bill, however, would only be the start of regulations of cosmetic contact lenses. Prescribing and dispensing regulations are provincially controlled. The next step would be for the provinces to also change their regulations to treat cosmetic lenses the same as corrective lenses.

The hope is that the passage of this bill will bring the issue to the attention of provincial health ministers, and it is essential for governments to establish a firm timetable for achieving effective regulations of these devices.

By way of background, what are cosmetic contact lenses? These are lenses that are usually used to change the colour and/or appearance of eyes. They have become increasingly popular, being marketed as fashion or Halloween accessories, at beauty salons, novelty shops, flea markets, convenience stores and through online businesses.

While it is difficult to estimate the exact size of the cosmetic contact lens market in Canada, all available indicators point to a growing market in recent years. It is also mostly young people, who are often less informed and more prone to taking risks, who are wearing cosmetic contact lenses more frequently.

There is no essential difference between cosmetic contact lenses and corrective lenses because both are inserted in and interact with the eye. Moreover, some cosmetic lenses cover a larger portion of the eye, known as the sclera lens, and do not have the same oxygen permeability as corrective lenses and may be more dangerous.

Cosmetic lenses can be worn safely, just as is the case for corrective lenses, provided they are appropriately prescribed and dispensed by a licensed professional. However, problems arise when they are not suited for the particular purchaser or are an improper size and are not fitted correctly. Each eye has its own unique shape and curvature. Also, if they are of questionable quality from an unknown supplier, they can be dangerous.

It is often the case that critical information and proper instructions are not provided to consumers concerning how to use the lenses safely, for instance, concerning insertion, removal and cleaning.

Again, it is mostly youth, who are more prone to taking risks, who are wearing these devices and risking damage to their eyes.

Although cosmetic lenses appear harmless, serious eye injuries can occur, as an allergic reaction, bacterial infection, swelling or inflammation of the cornea may result. In serious cases, ulceration or scratches of the cornea, impaired vision and even blindness or eye loss can be the result. Some of this damage can occur in as little as 24 hours, can be difficult to treat or there can be permanent damage caused. The risk of potential harm for any type of contact lenses has already been proven.

There is an abundance of evidence and research concerning the dangers of using cosmetic contact lenses improperly and without professional involvement. By way of international comparison, until 2005, the U.S. also exempted cosmetic contact lenses from regulation under its food and drugs act. At the urging of eye care professionals, of course, a bill was passed to ensure that all contact lenses, corrective or cosmetic, are regulated as medical devices within the United States.

● (1720)

Now, according to the FDA in the United States, it is against the law in the U.S. to sell cosmetic contact lenses without a valid prescription or note from an eye doctor.

In October 2000, Health Canada issued a health warning about cosmetic lenses because of their being obtainable without a prescription, being improperly fitted and not being subject to health assessment as corrective lenses. It highlighted the risks and potential for injury associated with cosmetic lenses and recommended that they only be used under the supervision of an eye care professional.

In September 2003, Health Canada commissioned a third party risk assessment, entitled "Human Health Risk Assessment of Cosmetic Contact Lens". In it, it concluded that the available evidence suggests "that the level of risk associated with the use of cosmetic contact lenses is comparable to that associated with corrective lenses and may be potentially higher".

Given these risks, it recommended that cosmetic contact lenses be regulated by Health Canada and that they require a prescription for their use and that their sale be restricted to regulated health professionals.

In March 2008 a motion passed unanimously in the House called for the development of a regulation that cosmetic contact lenses be regulated as medical devices under the FDA or the Hazardous Products Act. It received all-party support and was passed unanimously.

After the motion, the government incorporated the motion's recommendation into one of its omnibus health bills, Bill C-51, as it was known then. Unfortunately, that legislation died on the order paper when Parliament was prorogued.

The NDP believes that the vision health of Canadians should be protected and that this is a simple measure that would help reduce the incidence of eye injuries. As both types of lenses have the same set of health risks, the regulations for cosmetic contact lenses must be the same as those for corrective contact lenses.

This bill addresses an issue that optical health professionals have called on the government to fix for years. It has taken a Conservative member of Parliament, to her credit, independently suggesting regulations for cosmetic contact lenses to bring this issue to the government's attention. It is regrettable that it requires a private member's bill. This is something that should be implemented by the government immediately. The NDP recognizes that this is an important first step for the federal government to take to finally establish an effective regulatory regime for cosmetic contact lenses.

There is broad, unanimous and widespread support for this measure in the stakeholder community. The Canadian Association of Optometrists, the Canadian Ophthalmological Society and the Opticians Association of Canada all have been publicizing the risks associated with this product and asking Health Canada to regulate them under the Food and Drugs Act.

The Canadian Association of Optometrists, talking about people's eyesight and, in most cases, young people's eyesight, stated:

There are daily news stories from around the world about the complications that can arise due to ill-fitting cosmetic lenses or improper use and handling. It is an important vision health issue and the optometrists, opticians and ophthalmologists of Canada are asking for unanimous support from the House, Senate and Health Canada to adopt this amendment and enact it with haste.

There has been increasing activity in Europe, Asia and, as I said, North America by associations calling for exactly that.

According to key facts and figures, it has been estimated that the rate of injury and complications for this use is around 1% of all users. This is an alarming rate, considering the number of contact lenses in use. Recent studies in France and by the FDA in the United States make it clear that this is a potentially dangerous object that should be regulated.

Finally, these regulations are to protect Canadians' vision health, especially in young people, who may not appreciate the consequences and risks associated with cosmetic contact lenses.

One of the first responsibilities of government should be to protect Canadians from potentially dangerous products. This bill would ensure that corrective and cosmetic contact lenses would have the same protection from the same health risks and would be regulated in the same way by government. This bill is a simple measure that would help prevent eye injuries in Canada, and the New Democrats are proud to support this logical, reasonable measure that is long overdue.

• (1725)

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to stand here this evening as we go through the

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final second hour of third reading of my private member's Bill C-313.

This has been a fairly long process. It started back in 2007 with the introduction of my private member's motion, which as the member across has alluded to, was passed unanimously but then died on the order paper. It is greatly gratifying to see that the bill has reached this stage.

I want to thank the members who have spoken not only tonight in favour of this bill but all the way through this process. Whether it was through second reading or whether it was at committee stage, there has been wonderful support for the bill. All members and all parties have shown support, and I thank them for that.

There has been support through two ministers of health, as well, and Health Canada. The bill has been very well supported.

The industry has been 100% supportive. I have received a great deal of assistance from it in getting the correct medical facts. I have received wonderful support from everybody involved.

We know that this bill would help improve and protect the eye health of Canadians, as has been said in many cases, affecting our young people more than others.

I am pleased to see the bill at this stage. I look forward to its being passed through the House and sent on to the other place.

• (1730)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I declare the motion carried.

(Bill read the third time and passed)

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

[*Translation*]

HOUSING

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before the budget was tabled, I asked the minister what she intended to do when a number of financial agreements between the federal government and housing co-ops and non-profit housing organizations expire.

She replied that the government was making investments in new social housing, including renovations for 21,000 seniors and 415 projects for persons with disabilities. However, I have still not been given an answer about existing social housing.

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Almost all social housing built before 1994 was covered by long-term financial agreements with the federal government. These subsidies ensure that low-income renters can pay rent that is geared to income. With the expiry of these agreements, many renters will suffer because their rents will double or even triple.

There is nothing for social housing, nothing for affordable housing and nothing for the renewal of operating agreements for housing co-operatives and non-profit housing organizations in the 2012 budget or the famous Bill C-38, which is a real Trojan Horse.

There is nothing to help the more than 1.5 million households, or 13% of all Canadian households, that have core housing needs or that do not have access to decent housing that they can afford. The 21,000 people who received help from the government represent just 1.4% of all households that do not have access to affordable housing.

I have a hard time believing the government when it says it is investing in social housing. What is more, the budget makes no mention of social programs, including homelessness and housing, although there is a real need.

The City of Montreal, the Union des municipalités du Québec and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities all made requests of this budget, but all those requests were ignored. Unfortunately, there is still no long-term investment plan for housing. A petition was tabled in the House of Commons two weeks ago calling on the federal government to provide the necessary funding to renovate, improve and modernize all social housing.

I would like to know why the federal government did not allocate any funding to social housing in its budget, in order to help renters affected by the end of these subsidies. At the same time, I would also like to respond to the parliamentary secretary's question about why the opposition never supports the government's initiatives in the area of social housing.

I would answer that it is impossible for us to support initiatives that will help only 21,000 people, when there are over 1.5 million households that need assistance. Conversely, why does the government present initiatives that do not meet the needs of more Canadians?

[*English*]

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot for asking the question to explain the government's approach to affordable Housing.

Hon. members on this side of the House are deeply committed to ensuring that Canadians have access to affordable housing. We have backed up this commitment by supporting unprecedented investments in this area. As I've noted previously in this House, the government believes that everyone in Canada deserves a stable, safe and affordable place to call home. We recognize that not everyone can achieve this on his or her own, which is why our government, the provinces and territories and other stakeholders have looked to address the housing needs of some of Canada's most vulnerable citizens.

Canada's economic action plan delivered on more than 14,000 projects for vulnerable individuals including low-income seniors, people with disabilities and first nations people living on reserve.

● (1735)

[*Translation*]

Our track record is very impressive. Since 2006, our government has invested approximately \$12.5 billion in housing. This funding has helped support households living in existing social housing, create new affordable housing and revitalize the stock of social housing for future generations.

[*English*]

The hon. member is particularly concerned that some long-term agreements with social housing are expiring. This is the normal course of business. These agreements that are expiring were put in place many years ago and are ending on schedule as the mortgages on housing projects are paid off. Many other long-term operating agreements are ongoing and will remain in place for the next number of years.

As the hon. member knows, the federal-provincial-territorial working group has been created to examine the financial liability of the existing social housing stock as these agreements expire. In the meantime, our government continues to spend \$1.7 billion a year to ensure that almost 615,000 households living in existing social housing can continue to afford their homes.

Furthermore, through Canada's economic action plan, our government invested \$1 billion over two years for the renovation and retrofit of existing social housing. In addition, through bilateral agreements with the provinces and territories, a combined investment of \$1.4 billion is being made under the new investments and affordable housing framework to continue to reduce the number of Canadians living in housing need. I am pleased to say that the agreements have been signed in every province and territory.

Under these agreements, federal funding is matched by the provinces and territories that, with the exception of P.E.I. and the Yukon which have opted to extend their previous agreements with CMHC, are responsible for program design and delivery in their jurisdictions.

In addition, I want to emphasize that we will continue to invest heavily in housing. This year, through CMHC, the Government of Canada will invest approximately \$2 billion in housing.

I will say again that our government has made record investments in housing programs over the past number of years. Unfortunately, the NDP has voted against every one of these initiatives.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin: Mr. Speaker, given the government's track record of distancing itself from housing issues, I am surprised to hear my colleague say that the government cares about access to housing. That is definitely not the case right now.

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As I said before and will say again, 1.5 million Canadian households have an urgent need for housing. These people are living in housing that is unsanitary, too expensive or too small for their families. There are also between 150,000 and 300,000 homeless people in Canada right now.

I do not think that ending subsidies will solve these problems. Rather, it will lengthen the list of people who need better housing, and more people will end up homeless.

Why is the government offloading responsibility for social housing onto the provinces?

[*English*]

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, I do find it a bit rich that NDP members continue to demand funding for social housing when their voting record is crystal clear. Every time, they vote against the greatest investments that we have made in social housing in our nation's history.

Again, I would like to draw the hon. member's attention to our record on affordable housing.

Since 2006, our government has invested an estimated \$12.5 billion in housing. This funding has benefited low-income Canadians and the communities they live in across the country. There were 97,000 renovation projects and 21,000 seniors have benefited from improvement in their housing. There were 430 projects that helped Canadians with disabilities. This year alone, the government will spend more than \$2 billion on housing, which includes \$1.7 billion in subsidies to support 615,000 households living in existing social housing on and off reserve.

As members can see, our government is working hard to ensure Canadians across the country have access to safe, suitable, affordable housing.

I encourage members opposite to support these initiatives that support those Canadians in need of housing.

● (1740)

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today as a follow-up to a question that I raised on March 2, regarding the bad environmental and economic choices made by the Conservative government.

Since I asked my question, the government has tabled a budget and a budget implementation bill that illustrate once again its inability to reconcile the environment and the protection of our economy. I am going to provide a few examples.

The budget implementation bill proposes to repeal the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act. In addition to speeding up the process and restricting public consultation, the government reserves the right to overturn rulings made by review panels to allow major projects promoted by powerful oil interests. To make matters worse, the new regulations will apply to review processes that are already underway, so that projects such as the oil sands and the northern gateway pipeline could escape close scrutiny.

The second example is taken from the budget. The government is giving \$8 million to the Canada Revenue Agency to monitor charities, including environmental groups, to ensure they do not get involved in the public debate. The government claims that these groups should not get involved in politics. In addition to interfering with a fundamental freedom, namely the freedom of expression, this measure seeks to prevent environmental groups from participating in the public debate and will yet again weaken the environmental assessment process by giving free reign to lobbyists representing big oil companies.

My third example is the changes to the Fisheries Act. Relaxing the act's requirements will jeopardize the economic activity related to commercial and recreational fisheries. In fact, John Fraser and Tom Siddon, two former Conservative ministers of Fisheries and Oceans, have condemned these changes. I think they are absolutely right. It does not make any sense to want to promote economic development by jeopardizing the work of thousands of fishermen and workers whose livelihood depends on tourism.

The budget also repeals the Kyoto Implementation Act. I have said it repeatedly in this House: this is an ideological decision that will end up costing us more in the long run. First, there is the issue of costs related to climate change. We can think, for example, of shoreline erosion, of the impact of global warming on agriculture, and of the destruction caused by severe weather events, but there is also the whole issue of missed opportunities for Canada regarding jobs in green industries.

With the elimination of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, the major decisions regarding our collective future will now be taken without any serious analysis. Unfortunately, it is future generations that will pay the price.

Finally, the budget also targets environmental sciences. I particularly condemn the abolition of the experimental lakes program run by the Freshwater Institute in northern Ontario, and of the MRS program, as well as the research, technology and instrumentation grants program run by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada.

Hundreds of scientists will be affected by these cuts, and some important and irreplaceable data will be lost.

Will the government introduce a sustainable plan to develop our natural resources and to preserve them for future generations, for our children and grandchildren?

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her question.

[*English*]

It is always a pleasure to address the member in the House on such important issues. I would like to start with her original question that she put in the House on March 2.

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She made a claim that the government would “slash the Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency's budget by 43%”. I hope she has read the budget since then to see that in fact not only was the entire funding allocation for this agency renewed, but there was increased allocation for participant funding. Once again, this demonstrates our government's commitment to ensuring that there is rigour in environmental assessment in opposition to what she has been saying tonight.

The one thing I picked up on was the member spoke with great disdain around the terminology “big oil companies”. She uses it like a term of derision. I find that very interesting because her leader is in Alberta today. He is touring the oil sands in Fort McMurray, which is a great wealth of natural resources. I hope she will listen to some of the comments he made. He did agree that this was a great driver of the Canadian economy. I certainly hope we will see a change in tune from him rather than these divisive comments pitting workers in Alberta against workers in Ontario.

Instead of acknowledging that this is a resource that should be developed for all Canadians, she talked at the end of her speech about ensuring that it was around for generations to come. I agree with her. We do need to ensure that we see this develop sustainably. That is why our government has implemented what has been called a world-class monitoring system for the oil sands. The commissioner for the environment has called it robust. He has called it leading and world class. It is a step in the right direction. We have great partnership with the province of Alberta on this.

Also, there are technologies being developed by industry in partnership with government to ensure that those resources are developed and that land is reclaimed on the back end.

I think my colleague is originally from Alberta. I hope she would visit her hometown, as her leader has done, to see the big oil companies. Frankly, I hope I do not hear that term used by her party as derision. We should be talking about the energy sector as a driver of the economy.

I will close with some quotes that came out of our subcommittee on finance reviewing the changes in the budget implementation act, which are designed to ensure we have environmental sustainability with economic growth. We want to ensure that businesses have predictability and timeliness in process but that we still ensure the rigour. In the environmental assessment, we feel the bill does that.

We asked the commissioner of the environment about the screening level assessments. Right now screening level assessments comprise 99% of the environmental assessments that are conducted through the Environmental Assessment Agency. I asked him if he would characterize us transferring resources from 99% of these screenings, 94% of which he is on the record saying have little to no environmental impact at all, to focus on larger projects to ensure we have resources within the agency and to ensure that those big projects, which the member talked about, are adequately concluded.

We are on the right track. I certainly hope she will support our measures in this regard.

● (1745)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Laurin Liu: Mr. Speaker, I would like to respond to all of the points that my hon. colleague raised, but unfortunately, I have just one minute to do so.

I would like to repeat that the government made cuts to important environmental monitoring programs, such as the experimental lakes program in the Experimental Lakes Area.

This is about the fundamental difference between the NDP and the Conservative Party. The difference is that the NDP supports economic development and the development of Canada's natural resources. However, New Democrats support responsible science- and research-based development that conserves resources for future generations.

I would like to repeat my question. When will the government introduce a sustainable natural resource development plan that respects provincial jurisdiction and maximizes benefits for Canadians?

[*English*]

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, I want to clarify that “cut” does not mean renew funding or implement world-class monitoring systems. We have invested in environmental assessments. We have invested in world-class monitoring systems. We have invested in research and development funding for clean energy technology.

In fact, in the budget we have added stiff penalties for people who do not follow up with the guidelines in the environmental assessments. All of these are contained in the budget bill. They are designed to ensure that sustainable growth.

I hope my colleague will support it.

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise this evening to pursue a question that I initially put to the Prime Minister on March 1. It relates to an issue that is increasingly worrying to many Canadians regardless of how they voted.

This is not a partisan issue, and I want to set that out as a foundation. I include in my statement of non-partisan interest in this issue that I do not believe for a moment that in ridings where there were alleged dirty tricks there is a chance that Conservative candidates, many of whom I have great affection for, would have known about the voter suppression techniques that were used in the election that took place on May 2, 2011.

With the context out of the way, I want to pursue the question I asked on March 1, which was this: in the context of the voter suppression phone calls, which some people call robocalls, we need to understand them as multiple acts of illegal activity. Each single phone call purporting to be Elections Canada when it was not Elections Canada represents a crime. It is a crime on two levels. It is a crime against our fair and democratic free elections under the Canada Elections Act. Purporting to be someone you are not for purposes of fraud is also a crime under the Criminal Code.

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It is criminal activity that occurred multiple times in multiple ridings. That is the context. You can call them robocalls, but it is election fraud we are discussing.

My question for the Prime Minister on March 1 dealt with the fact that I am personally aware of extensive evidence of electoral fraud that occurred in Saanich—Gulf Islands, the riding I represent, in the election in which I was not a candidate, the one in 2008, about which the New Democratic Party filed complaints. The Liberal Party filed complaints. Public interest groups like Democracy Watch filed complaints. Third party groups that were concerned about election fraud also filed complaints. Yet, despite a lot of evidence, the RCMP and Elections Canada were unable to get to the bottom of it, which is why I do not think we are yet on the right track to get to the bottom of what happened on May 2, 2011.

This is not to suggest malfeasance on anyone's part, it is just the reality that I examined. Let me tell you what happened. The failure to get to the bottom of that leads me to the inevitable conclusion that the Prime Minister must call a public inquiry that is properly funded and has subpoena powers and a proper staff to find out how election fraud took place in 2008 in Saanich—Gulf Islands and across Canada on May 2, 2011.

The reality is this. Calls were made in Saanich—Gulf Islands at the last minute on the night before the election only to those voters who supported the New Democratic Party. What would be strange about how this unknown, mysterious calling program got the phone numbers of people only supporting the NDP, as far as I know, to call purportedly from the NDP and urge people to go out and vote NDP?

There was no NDP candidate on the ballot. The name remained, but the candidate had withdrawn. These were spoof calls, as we now know the term, in that the phone number that appeared on the call display was actually a home fax number for an executive within the NDP, who filed complaints. With the information they had, they pursued it. He was initially told to go to the Saanich police and complain there. Then he went to the RCMP.

Nothing was discovered because it was not properly investigated. With issues this important, must we not have a full public inquiry? I asked for a full public inquiry from Elections Canada in May of last year and have still not had a response.

I ask the Conservative Party representatives here tonight to explain how we are going to get to the bottom of this if we do not have an inquiry.

● (1750)

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will remind the member that we are here in Parliament. This is not about parties. This is about speaking to each other as parliamentarians. We are the government here.

As the government stated numerous times in this House regarding issues like this and the most recent issues, we want Elections Canada's investigations to go ahead regarding the most recent events. However, regarding concerns the member may have for previous elections which she has raised tonight, I would encourage her to follow up with Elections Canada.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the parliamentary secretary's invocation that we are parliamentarians here. We are, and as a parliamentarian, I am part of the government, and that is the difficulty we have. When we mess up our language and refer to opposition parties and government parties, we defy the traditions of Westminster parliamentary democracy. I speak here as the Leader of the Green Party, and I speak to my hon. friend, who is a representative of the Conservative Party in the Government of Canada.

Once again I say taking it up with Elections Canada is an inadequate response to a serious problem. In 2011 we know there were dozens of ridings in which election fraud took place. I find it absolutely shocking that representatives of any party in the House would be so little concerned, so little troubled that they would leave it to Elections Canada, particularly when budget 2012 cuts Elections Canada's budget by \$7.5 million, further compromising any ability of that agency to get to the bottom of criminal activity.

● (1755)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, this government has expressed its significant concern with these types of issues. As we have said, we encourage and we want Elections Canada to go ahead with investigations on the most recent issues.

Regarding something quite significant that happened in the past, as I mentioned to the member already this evening in the House, I would encourage her to speak with Elections Canada.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 5:56 p.m.)

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