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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Wednesday, October 3, 2012

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wednesday, October 3, 2012

The House met at 2 p.m.

Prayers

• (1405)

[*English*]

The Speaker: It being Wednesday, we will now have the singing of the national anthem led today by the hon. member for Etobicoke—Lakeshore.

[*Members sang the national anthem*]

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

[*English*]

OIL AND GAS INDUSTRY

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' lack of a coherent energy strategy is hurting Canada. We eastern Canadians are captive to expensive, insecure, imported oil. We pay a lot for gasoline and home heating oil, especially in northwestern Ontario.

Incredibly, there is more than enough oil produced in western Canada to meet all our needs, but it is exported for much less than eastern Canada pays for foreign oil. That price difference is costing our economy \$19 billion a year. The Governor of the Bank of Canada said that it was a major drag on our growth.

We must build a new pipeline to bring western petroleum to the east. Instead, the government wants to bulldoze a route through B.C. to ship raw bitumen to Communist China as fast as possible.

It is time for an energy strategy that takes care of our own energy security, creates value-added jobs in Canada and minds the long-term interests of Canada for a change.

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THANKSGIVING

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to build on the wonderful community spirit in Mississauga—Brampton South, I am hosting my annual fall fair and corn roast. This free event will take place on Sunday, October 14, at Sandford Farm Park from 1 to 3 p.m.

I invite all of my neighbours to visit my website to sign up for the pie baking and the pie eating contest. There will be a chubby-bunny marshmallow contest for younger children, face painting, bouncy castles, and performances by our local Croatian and South Asian dancers. We will also get some great visits from our new hockey team members, the Steelheads. Of course, our dedicated police officers, firefighters and paramedics will let children crawl through their wonderful vehicles.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving, I invite all of my neighbours to come and join me and, hopefully, this weekend to join us at the food bank where I will be volunteering with my son.

I wish everyone a happy Thanksgiving.

* * *

[*Translation*]

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in November of this year, VIA Rail service between Halifax and Montreal will be cut from six runs per week to three runs per week. As though that were not enough, now CN is threatening to shut down a 225 km stretch of track between Moncton and Bathurst within the next two years. This decision will have a direct impact on our industries and on the routes offered by VIA Rail.

Canada's railway is essential to economic development, and the government has a duty to protect the public interest and support economic development. The government talks about the economic recovery and development assistance, but what good is that rhetoric if we do not have the infrastructure to encourage industries to move to our regions?

If the government abandons this infrastructure, we can forget about economic development. The federal government cannot just sit back and do nothing, for it is to blame for privatizing CN. The government must act, and quickly.

Statements by Members

[English]

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, all Canadians benefit from the development of our natural resources. I urge all Canadians to take a step back to examine this issue from a rational point of view.

In today's society, all Canadians use natural resources. Whether it is the gas or electricity in our cars, the sticky notes on the fridge or the Tupperware filled with Thanksgiving leftovers, it all comes from natural resource products.

Practically speaking and in order to function in today's modern society and utilize these resources, we need to develop them. Whether we work in a small town coffee shop or in an office building in downtown Vancouver, natural resources are a part of our daily lives. That is why our government has introduced our plan for responsible resource development. To be clear, only the projects that have been determined to be safe and responsible will proceed. Our rational plan will ensure that we remain good stewards of the environment and our natural resources.

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LAKESHORE GENERAL HOSPITAL AUXILIARY

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I recently had the honour and the pleasure of attending the 50th anniversary luncheon of the Lakeshore General Hospital Auxiliary.

[Translation]

The auxiliary has been a central supporting pillar of the Lakeshore General since before it opened its doors in 1965.

[English]

In addition to organizing fundraising activities for hospital improvements and scholarships for nurses, the women and men in blue coats are a welcome and comforting presence to patients and their families dealing with the stress of tests or treatment.

In a very real sense, auxiliary members are also ambassadors carrying, with or without words, a heartening message to patients, "You are not alone. You are part of a caring community that offers you its support in times of need and personal challenge".

I would like to take this opportunity to thank auxiliary president Barbara Armbruster, past president Sally Brown, Terry Aitken and all of the other past and present auxiliary members who have helped the Lakeshore fulfill its vocation in our community for half a century.

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Ms. Wai Young (Vancouver South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week, I had the honour of attending the Union of British Columbia Municipalities 2012 convention in Victoria where I hosted a reception to celebrate sister city agreements between municipalities in Canada and China.

I shared with delegates our government's vision for deeper trade and cultural relationships for the benefit of Canadians, especially in British Columbia, Canada's gateway to the Asia-Pacific.

I also spoke about the positive investments our government is making in cities both big and small across Canada. These messages were well received.

I congratulate the organizers on this successful event and I encourage all communities to be at the forefront of Canada's future and to forge relationships with Asia-Pacific counterparts as we move into the Pacific century.

I look forward to working with all of my municipal colleagues as together we continue to create jobs, ensure our communities remain strong and secure Canada's long-term economic prosperity.

* * *

● (1410)

[Translation]

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while the Conservatives pat themselves on the back for their so-called economic policy and job creation, the reality is not so rosy. Their laissez-faire attitude and corporate tax cuts are not producing the desired effect.

The latest figures from Statistics Canada show a loss of 2,277 manufacturing companies in Montreal, which translates into a loss of over 61,700 jobs since the Conservatives came to power. They can add that to their record.

Creating a real industrial recovery policy is vital to Montreal.

Yesterday, my colleague recommended that the Conservatives read Zola's *Germinal*, but I think that it is too advanced for them. I recommend that they start with something simpler, such as "Economic Recovery for Dummies".

* * *

[English]

GARY FOSTER

Mr. Mike Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last week, our region paid its final respects to long-time potato farmer, community and family man, Gary Foster of Moose Mountain, New Brunswick.

Gary was a contract grower for McCain foods for 40 years. He also served on various committees, including the negotiating committee and the national safety net committee. He also was a very recent inductee into the New Brunswick Potato World Hall of Recognition.

Ever the person to lobby on behalf of growers, Gary was always well-informed on the issues and impossible to trip up on the numbers. Gary took great pride in getting things done and, behind the scenes in his very unassuming manner, worked hard for his community.

Gary lived by the Winston Churchill saying, "You make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give".

Statements by Members

The stories at the Hall of Recognition ceremony and at his funeral recounted his strong work ethic. When people were not quite performing or up to date on their files, well sometimes they just needed a GSU, a general sharpening up, but that was always for their betterment and the people around them.

Gary will certainly be missed by his family, the community and the industry in general. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his wife Dorothy, his children, Al and Kelly, and the entire Foster family.

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CONCEALMENT OF IDENTITY ACT

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Speaker, about one year ago, I introduced private member's Bill C-309, the concealment of identity act, which would fill a loophole in our country's laws and provide the police with a tool to protect public safety.

However, I recently learned that the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands has taken to Twitter to mislead Canadians about this bill. On September 19 she wrote, "If a peaceful event gets out of hand...and it's winter...and you have a scarf on...20 years in jail?"

The member knows full well that this bill is not aimed in any way at lawful protestors and yet, here she is accusing me of trying to throw Frosty the Snowman in the big house.

It is time for this lone Green Party member to depart from her fairy tale lands because police chiefs across the country, including Victoria's own Jamie Graham, are supporting this bill.

When it comes up for third reading, I encourage her to rise from this chamber's 309th seat and vote in favour of Bill C-309.

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CHARLES ROACH

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is with great sadness that I rise today to inform the House of the death of Charles Roach.

As my colleague from Scarborough—Rouge River pointed out yesterday, Charles was a great community leader in Toronto who fought for human rights, social justice and founded the Caribana festival.

Charles passed away last night after a long battle with cancer. Although he is no longer with us, his work for a more just and equal Canada will live on well past today.

Over his 57 years in Canada, Charles proved himself to be an exemplary Canadian citizen in every way but name. Charles wanted very much to become a Canadian citizen but he never received that honour because he wanted to swear his citizenship oath of allegiance to Canada directly rather than to the British Crown.

I ask today that the Government of Canada honour this great man and grant Charles Roach's last wish by awarding him posthumous Canadian citizenship. His commitment and contribution to our great country speaks for itself. This would be our way to thank him.

● (1415)

ARMY RESERVE RECOGNITION DAY

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, across our great nation today, Canadians are celebrating the first Army Reserve Recognition Day. We are paying tribute to the nearly 25,000 men and women who serve in Canada's reserve force.

Our reservists have made outstanding contributions to both international and domestic operations. Canada's army reservists were an integral part of our missions in Afghanistan and the humanitarian relief we brought to Haiti following that disastrous earthquake. They have served Canadians at home assisting with the ravages of fires and floods.

On a personal note, I have watched the reservists in action in Afghanistan and I could not tell the difference between the regular force and the reservists. More importantly, the Taliban could not tell the difference either.

I would like to thank our Canadian army reservists in communities across Canada for their sacrifices and their service to this great country.

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[*Translation*]

HOUSING

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in exactly two weeks, we will have the first hour of debate on my Bill C-400 for a national housing strategy.

This bill does not specifically deal with gender equality. However, all of the reports point out that women are the hardest hit by the housing crisis affecting all of Canada, mainly because more women than men are renters—50% compared to 32%—but also because they are poorer. The average income of male tenants is \$33,300 per year compared to \$25,800 for women. In Ottawa, the median rent is more than \$940 per month. With an income of \$25,000 per year, there is not much left over for other basic needs. Moreover, many women are victims of discrimination because their jobs are more precarious or they are single parents. They are turned down or forced to pay rent that is much too high.

Therefore, I invite all my colleagues to vote in favour of Bill C-400 in order to improve the lot of women in Canada.

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NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Robert Goguen (Moncton—Riverview—Dieppe, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the NDP still refuses to answer a simple question: does he support a carbon tax?

Statements by Members

The facts clearly show that he does. During a 2012 leadership race debate, he said he would raise money by imposing a carbon tax. This plan appears in the policy document. The NDP's platform even sets out in black and white that the party plans to raise \$21 billion in revenue by imposing a carbon tax.

[English]

We all know that the leader of the NDP has had trouble with numbers in the past. Is it possible that he is confused?

To simplify, will the leader of the NDP clearly tell us whether or not he will impose a carbon tax that would raise the price on everything? Can he explain what he means by the \$21 billion in revenue he expects to generate from carbon?

* * *

PAPAL HONOURS

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, His Holiness Pope Benedict has bestowed papal honours upon two prominent Canadian pioneers of interfaith dialogue, who will be honoured by the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism this Thursday evening.

[Translation]

The *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* cross, also known as the Cross of Honour, will be awarded to Father Irénée Beaubien for his exceptional contributions to the church and to the papacy.

[English]

Dr. Victor Goldbloom will be bestowed with the Papal Honour of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of Saint Sylvester Pope and Martyr, one of only five orders of knighthood awarded directly by the Pope.

[Translation]

This order recognizes his outstanding devotion and his leadership in promoting Jewish-Christian dialogue and understanding.

[English]

Dr. Goldbloom is now part of a small but distinguished group of Canadians to receive such a papal honour.

I know that colleagues would want to join me in congratulating these two outstanding individuals on their most deserving awards, reflecting their exceptional contributions to faith and society, as we salute the Canadian Centre for Ecumenism for its continued excellence in expanding dialogue and understanding.

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NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada is leading the way in jobs and economic growth. In fact, since July 2009, Canada has created over 770,000 net new jobs.

Of course, the NDP does not like to hear this good news because it thinks Canada has a disease and that disease is the hundreds of thousands of jobs in Canada's resource industries.

Not to worry, the NDP leader has a prescription: higher taxes. The NDP leader has a plan to impose a new \$21 billion job-killing carbon tax that would raise the price of everything.

Canadians already pay enough taxes and do not want to pay more taxes simply because the NDP leader wants them to. Let me say that our government will fight the NDP leader's plan to impose his dangerous job-killing carbon tax on—

● (1420)

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Chambly—Borduas.

* * *

[Translation]

CONSERVATIVE MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today I would like to express my pity for the members opposite. I am being sincere. I look at them and know that it must not be easy to live their working lives.

Every day before question period, they get a new assortment of pathetic stories to instill fear in people. Their obsession with imaginary taxes is in a strong contrast to reality, where drivers are paying every day for the Conservative government's inaction. Every day, my Conservative friends robotically recite pathetic lines written by staff of the Prime Minister's Office, employees who are counting down the days before they can become lobbyists or be appointed to the Senate.

However, there is a solution. I invite my Conservative friends, and especially the next member to speak, to look up from the Prime Minister's memo and tell us what is really going on in their ridings, talk to us seriously about concerns with respect to service cuts. They have a choice: they can continue to serve as PMO puppets or they can do what they should be doing, which is representing the interests of their constituents. The ball is in their court.

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[English]

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government has a low-tax plan to help create jobs and economic growth across the country. What does the opposition have? It has a plan to raise taxes on everything and kill jobs and economic growth.

The NDP's carbon tax would hurt Canadian families by raising the price of gas, groceries and even their electricity. If those members had their way, the people in my riding of Simcoe—Grey would have to pay more for their Thanksgiving turkey and potatoes by having increased tax on them. This tax would kill jobs by increasing overhead costs on key Canadian industries, like manufacturing, forestry and tourism.

Why will the NDP not admit to this plan? Why will the NDP not come clean and admit it wants to tax everything from gas to groceries?

Oral Questions

The proof is already out there. We just need to pick up a copy of the NDP platform to read about the NDP carbon tax in black and white.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[*Translation*]

FOOD SAFETY

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, four years ago, 22 Canadians died during the listeriosis crisis. The Minister of Agriculture has not learned from his mistakes. It has been 30 days since the E. coli bacteria was found in XL Foods products, but the Conservatives still cannot guarantee that there is no tainted meat on the market.

How can the Prime Minister say that they have improved the food inspection process when his Minister of Agriculture is overseeing the largest recall of tainted meat in the history of Canada?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, beginning on September 4, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency acted based on the available information. First, it contained the contaminated products and then recently it closed the plant. The agency's position is clear: it will not reopen the plant until it can be declared safe.

[*English*]

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is not just one plant Canadians are worried about, it is all of them.

There are not even clear standards for when meat should be discarded if the risk of contamination is too high. No standards. The CFIA's director of meat inspection said yesterday, "we essentially asked people to keep [an] eye and look at it. But there wasn't a lot of structure about how people went at that".

Is this the kind of self-regulation that the Conservatives think will actually protect Canadians or are we just waiting for the next disaster?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said repeatedly, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is responsible for these matters. It is a highly regarded agency internationally. From September 4 when it first had information on problems, it responded by containing certain contaminated product and it has been acting on information ever since, up to and including closing the plant.

Yesterday, the NDP members were complaining about the fact that the plant is closed. The position of CFIA is that the plant will remain closed until such time as its operations can be assured to be safe.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, more fairy tales about NDP positions.

Today, two small grocery store chains in B.C.—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

• (1425)

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Leader of the Opposition has the floor.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair: Mr. Speaker, today two small grocery store chains in B.C. publicly acknowledged that they had stocked recalled beef. These were good, honest business owners who wanted to protect their customers. The problem is that the Minister of Agriculture still has not put those same retailers on the list of stores that carried tainted beef from XL Foods. The store owners are coming forward with information, but the minister cannot even get that information out to Canadians.

Why is the Minister of Agriculture busy doing photo ops instead of answering questions and being accountable?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is not politicians who undertake these particular activities. It is the Canadian Food Inspection Agency that operates according to the authorities vested in it in law and according to the information at its disposal. When it has had that information, it has acted.

The government identified some time ago that the agency could use additional powers in these circumstances. Those additional powers are contained in legislation presently before Parliament. We urge the opposition parties to support that legislation.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we have not heard the minister answer a single question in the House this week, but he was a guest speaker at a luncheon in Battleford, Saskatchewan when the minister said, "we had some great Canadian beef for lunch.... I don't know where it came from, I don't care".

Is the minister not aware that CFIA is warning Canadian consumers to ask grocers if their beef came from XL Foods? When will the minister stop making jokes, stop contradicting food safety officials and take his job seriously?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians know that their health and safety is a top priority for this government. In fact, Canada has a superior food safety system. I will read a quote from a report on OECD countries regarding food safety. It states:

Canada is one of the best-performing countries in the 2010 Food Safety Performance World Ranking study. Its overall grade was superior—earning it a place among the top-tier countries.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the agriculture minister was not done. When he was asked about the E. coli tainted beef recall, he said, "we've identified some anomalies in the XL Plant". Anomalies? Really? Update for the minister: the plant is closed.

Why is the minister refusing to take responsibility and why is he minimizing the largest beef recall in Canadian history? Why is he speaking at luncheons and not answering Canadians in the House of Commons?

Oral Questions

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will reiterate that the health and safety of Canadians is a top priority for this government. It is important to note that the CFIA acted to contain contaminated products beginning on September 4, and has been acting ever since.

As the Prime Minister has stated, the XL plant is closed. CFIA closed the plant and it will not be allowed to reopen until the CFIA has certified that it is safe.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the head of the inspection agency, which the Prime Minister is now using as his defence with respect to what is taking place, was talking about the question of what the standards for Canada were going to be with respect to E. coli content. He said, "I'm fairly confident we're going to have that as well, I just don't know what the number is going to be".

If the agency does not know what the number is going to be, how can Canadians have confidence that Canada is going to have the highest standards in the world with respect to E. coli?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency determines these things. It determines them based upon the best scientific information it has and also information it gathers from inspections and from documentation submitted by the various operations that it inspects.

We have confidence in that agency. As the parliamentary secretary just indicated, in international studies, it has been judged to be one of the best performing agencies in the world.

However, obviously we have been working through the Weatherill report and other recommendations to strengthen any deficiencies that we do find.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the latest public health data that I have seen says that Canada's rates for E. coli outbreak are 30% more than the United States and 40% more than Europe.

Given that fact, could the Prime Minister tell us why regulations under legislation with respect to the context of E. coli are not clearly set out in regulation, are not clearly set out in the law and are not clearly enforceable and, in fact, enforced by the agency that is responsible for protecting the health of Canadians?

• (1430)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, as I have said, these things are not determined by politicians. They are determined by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the appropriate authorities, acting under the law.

Notwithstanding that there are problems to which the agency must respond from time to time, Canada's food safety record is among the best in the entire world.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Guide for Ministers and Ministers of State handed out by the Prime Minister to his cabinet ministers clearly states that ministers "must be present in Parliament to answer honestly and accurately about their areas of responsibility".

We find that the agency is not the only one responsible. Indeed, the minister shares that responsibility with the agency, and the Prime Minister is also responsible for providing information to consumers.

Why are consumers always the last ones to be informed of problems?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is not true. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency reacted beginning on September 4, based on the information at its disposal, to contain certain contaminated products. The agency has since taken action leading to the plant's closure. It has clearly stated that the plant will not reopen until its production is declared safe.

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TREASURY BOARD

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last year, the Parliamentary Budget Officer released a report on the government's fiscal transparency.

At the time, the President of the Treasury Board said, "So by next year, we will be able to have the answers in order to compare." The time has come for that comparison.

The report released today reveals that less than one-third of departments have presented any details on the repercussions of the strategic review.

In short, the majority of departments failed the test. What does the minister have to say about that failure?

[*English*]

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said before in this place, we continue to report to Parliament, using the normal and usual methods. These include the estimates, the quarterly financial reports, the public accounts and the reports on plans and priorities. All of these are delivered to members opposite, to Parliament and to the Canadian public.

We are taking a principled approach to balance the budget. Our public debt is down. Our services to Canadians, such as OAS and health transfers are up, which is much more useful to balance the budget as counter-opposed to the opposition members who want to have a \$21 billion carbon tax. That is not responsible.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us be clear here. The minister promised Parliament better disclosure, but he failed to deliver.

The PBO said that less than one-third of organizations had presented details on the impact of this year's budget, and the results of this year's budget cuts will not be presented to Canadians until the fall of 2014.

Why are Conservatives afraid to tell Canadians the truth? Are they hiding the information, or do they really just not know? Which is it, deception or mismanagement?

Oral Questions

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Neither, Mr. Speaker. In fact, as I indicated, and as the hon. member well knows, we have a reporting procedure in this Parliament. It involves quarterly reports. It involves the public accounts. It involves the estimates. As those reports are published, they provide the details that the hon. member is so keen about.

I would give some advice to the budget officer. He should spend his time worrying more about his mandate, which is about how we spend money not the money that we do not spend.

* * *

[*Translation*]

FOOD SAFETY

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the problem with the Conservatives is that they have no idea what is going on in the different departments, or so it seems with this E. coli tainted meat crisis. The minister was incommunicado for several days while Canadians were looking for answers. The beef recall keeps expanding every day.

Why are the Conservatives refusing to take responsibility for this crisis and why did they wait so long to tell the truth?

• (1435)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, food safety and the health of Canadians are our government's priority. We have strengthened our system, no thanks to the opposition. As I was saying yesterday, we increased the number of inspectors to 700, but the opposition voted against that. If the opposition thinks that the CFIA's powers are inadequate, then it should support the bill our government has introduced to give the agency more powers.

[*English*]

The opposition has already said that it will vote against the legislation when it comes—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Berthier—Maskinongé.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are limits to shirking responsibility for what goes on in one's own department.

The United States discovered the problem on September 3, and yet the plant at the centre of all this remained open for another three weeks, until September 27. Thousands of Canadians were exposed to E. coli because of this unacceptable delayed reaction.

Why did it take 24 days to close a plant that was known to have such a problem?

[*English*]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have been explaining, the CFIA acted to contain contaminated products beginning on September 4, and it has been acting ever since.

Our government has taken the responsibility to increase resources for the CFIA so it can better do its job. Every time we do that, the opposition votes against it.

In 2007 we made available \$223 million for the food safety and consumer action plan, and the opposition voted against it; \$13 million over two years to hire more inspectors in budget 2010, and the opposition voted against it; \$100 million over five years for inspection modernization, and the opposition voted against it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Pilon (Laval—Les Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have some nerve. The minister claimed that no tainted meat made its way onto grocery store shelves. We now know that was absolutely not true. At the height of the contamination crisis, the minister said that his priority was to deliver meat to the U.S.

Why did the Conservatives choose rhetoric over public safety? Why did they not act sooner?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, the CFIA took measures to contain contaminated products beginning on September 4 and it has continued to work relentlessly on this matter.

[*English*]

Our food safety system has been rated as a superior food safety system. We now have legislation in the Senate to take a strong system and make it better.

I have a quote from the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. It has said that Bill S-11 “will better equip Canada to maintain its reputation as a world leader in food safety and traceability protocols”.

The NDP have taken the ill-informed and desperate situation and have said “no” to this legislation before—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Edmonton—Strathcona.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when BSE was confirmed in 2003, Alberta steer prices dropped from \$1.05 to 35¢ a pound, resulting in a severe blow to the Alberta economy. Yet the government has failed to take the necessary precautionary measures to avoid these situations, measures recommended by government consultants as early as 2009. It is Alberta ranchers who continue to pay the price of failed action.

When will the minister finally listen to the calls for action and initiate preventative measures?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will say it again. It is the health and safety of Canadians that is the top priority for this government. The XL plant was closed by CFIA, and it will not reopen until CFIA determines that it is safe.

We have been taking measures to improve food safety and we have enacted the 57 recommendations within the Weatherill report. We put aside \$75 million to do so. The opposition members voted against that. They must account to Canadians for this failure on their part.

*Oral Questions**[Translation]***NATIONAL DEFENCE**

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the health of Canadians and the health of our troops, we cannot take any chances. I was a medical technician in the armed forces. I know the importance of health care for our troops. I was a health care provider. In matters of military health, the Surgeon General is the final authority. A number of emails obtained under the Access to Information Act show that the Surgeon General was so concerned about cuts in mental health services that he sounded the alarm.

Why are the Conservatives not listening to the recommendations of the Surgeon General for the Canadian Forces?

• (1440)

[English]

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her service to the Canadian Forces.

This is one of the issues of which I am most proud. Our government has seen an increase of over \$100 million to the Canadian Forces health budget, bringing it to over \$450 million annually. In addition to that, we have made specific investments of \$11.4 million to the issues surrounding mental health.

There is always more we can do. We will always strive to put the interests and the health and well-being of our ill and injured men and women in uniform first when it comes to the Canadian Forces.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if there were no negative consequences for mental health care, the Surgeon General would not have sounded the alarm.

I hope they are not going to attack the Surgeon General, who called his superiors to ask them to reverse the Conservative decision.

[English]

Having served as a medical technician in the Canadian Forces, I know the importance of quality mental care for the troops. Why did the Conservatives go down this road of reckless cuts? Have they no shame? Why go after the delivery of health care to Canadian soldiers?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the contrary. I have just told the member that we have actually increased health funding during the last six years. We are actually now at an all-time high when it comes to the health services provided to members of the Canadian Forces, particularly mental health.

There has been a concerted effort of late, led by the Chief of the Defence Staff and by the entire leadership of the Canadian Forces, to see that the \$11.4 million goes directly to front-line mental health providers. We have tremendous people in the field dealing with the issue of operational stress. We are proud of that effort. There is always more and we will do more.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on the chopping block were mental health research jobs, long-term military

health planning, the accreditation program, training for military doctors and much more. It is no wonder the Surgeon General pressed the panic button. It is his professional duty and obligation to offer the best health services to soldiers. He felt it was urgent to intervene because the Conservatives' reckless cuts had what he called a profound impact and threatened the very services he had to deliver.

Do the Conservatives now acknowledge that their irresponsible cuts threaten the health and safety of Canadian Forces members?

Hon. Peter MacKay (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, what I acknowledge is that among NATO countries Canada has been deemed the best when it comes to the provision of health and mental health vis-à-vis our soldiers. The ratio of mental health providers to soldiers has been ranked the best among NATO.

We will continue to work with the mental health associations across the country. I met with them as recently as this week. We will continue to make investments, including increasing investments for those mental health providers. I elicit the support of the member opposite rather than these reckless criticisms.

* * *

FOOD SAFETY

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, with E. coli trouble worsening, including a spike in cases in Saskatchewan and now a restaurant closed in Regina, the Prime Minister says that Bill S-11 is all that he needs. However, the Conservative senator sponsoring the bill says Bill S-11 has nothing to do with the current E. coli issues.

Will the government amend Bill S-11 to require a detailed audit of all food safety resources and procedures right now, not five years from now, and will that audit be done not by an impugned minister but by the Auditor General of Canada?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will address a gross inaccuracy in that question.

The House will be aware that today the president of the Food Inspection Agency specifically expressed concerns about the promptness with which the company had provided certain information to inspectors. Under Bill S-11, the CFIA would get increased power to get that kind of paperwork for the company. That is precisely why it is needed.

The Auditor General has powers to look at a whole range of government agencies, but we do not direct the work of the Auditor General.

Oral Questions

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, at a disastrous news conference today, the Minister of Agriculture smugly stated that the government is “the chief defender of consumer health”. If this is the case, then Canadians are in real trouble. The Minister of Health has remained shockingly silent on the issue. The government has provided misleading and confusing answers to this crisis every day.

Why has the Minister of Health and the director of the Public Health Agency of Canada not stepped in to make sure Canadians are getting the right information?

• (1445)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, once again, Canadians know that the health and safety of Canadians is a top priority for our government. We have taken a number of measures to improve food safety which the opposition members have not supported. They must account to Canadians for that.

I would ask the member to check with her colleague, the member for Malpeque, who said, “I personally believe that our food is safe in Canada”.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am starting to understand why the minister is avoiding questions—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Guelph has the floor.

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Speaker, I am starting to understand why the minister is avoiding questions, but showing up at a Calgary lab and then XL Foods today is like visiting an accident scene after he removed the stoplights.

The Conservatives cut \$56.1 million from the CFIA, yet claim to have all the inspectors they need. If they exist, can the government table today their names, job descriptions and locations? Can the government answer why, when Sheila Weatherill requested this information and a third party audit specific to all CFIA resources, including staffing, the government failed to do one?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the real question is why is it that the opposition consistently—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. parliamentary secretary has the floor.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, the real question is why the opposition consistently works against increasing the resources and the authorities for the CFIA.

I went through some previous examples, but the member mentioned the Weatherill report. The Weatherill report contained 57 recommendations which we have implemented. We put aside \$75 million to implement those 57 recommendations. The member voted—

The Speaker: The hon. member for LaSalle—Émard.

[*Translation*]

FOREIGN INVESTMENT

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, with less than 10 days to go before the Conservatives blindly approve the takeover of Nexen, time is running out to hold serious public consultations. Many Canadians are concerned about the impact this transaction could have on jobs, national security and the environment. They are concerned that Canada is going to lose control of its own natural resources. The legislation allows for public consultations to be held; there is nothing to be afraid of.

Will the government do the right thing and hold public consultations?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, as my colleague knows, section 36 indicates that any information obtained from an investor must be privileged and confidential. However, this does not prevent the sharing of opinions. That is how the law works.

The proposed decision will be scrutinized very closely. Every proposed transaction must be assessed to determine whether it provides a net benefit to Canada. We always make decisions in Canada's best interest, but we will not implement a process such as that proposed by the NDP, which would bring us back 30 or 40 years and prevent any form of investment here in Canada.

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, listening to Canadians' concerns does not take us backward; rather, it moves us forward.

We have heard Canadians' concerns because we listen to them, which is something the Conservatives refuse to do. Even the Conservative minister of small business suggested that the government should not play any sort of role in this decision.

Why is the minister trying to avoid public accountability? He knows full well that the law allows for public consultation. Why is there such a lack of transparency?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, my colleague is definitely not familiar with section 36 of the act. What the NDP is trying to do is implement a process that would politicize everything. There would no longer be any type of proposed investment here in Canada. The NDP wants to take us back 30 or 40 years.

Unlike the NDP, we believe in investment. Canada is open to investment, and every transaction will be assessed based on its merits. Investments must provide a net benefit to Canada. Decisions will be made in Canada's best interest.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us go back two years when every single Conservative MP in the House voted to make public hearings a mandatory part of foreign investment review. That was on November 16, 2010. The government has simply stopped listening to Canadians.

Oral Questions

The minister for small business said yesterday that government has no role “interfering in a private decision” like the Nexen takeover bid. Does the minister agree with his colleague? Does he agree that government has no role interfering in the Nexen decision which has implications throughout Canada?

• (1450)

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will indicate where I do not agree with my colleague across the floor. When we made improvements back in 2007, we put in guidelines for state-owned enterprises. Back in 2009, we put in provisions to make sure that security interests would be taken into account. Also back in 2009, we provided the tools to be able to communicate more with the public. We did this also earlier this year. The NDP always voted against those things.

This transaction will be scrutinized very closely. Every single decision made by the government is made in the greatest interests of the country.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is not scrutinized unless the government is consulting with Canadians.

The small business minister also said yesterday, and I quote from *Hansard*, “the real individuals are those who pay corporate income tax”. What arrogance. We have one of the most significant takeovers in decades and the government is telling all Canadians that it is none of their business.

Will the minister do the right thing, stop hiding from Canadians and vote tonight to consult the public on this takeover?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will quote Professor Ian Lee from Carleton University, who said, “It will politicize the process enormously”. He also said, “They’re trying to transform these” approval processes “into kangaroo courts”. He continued further, “The whole purpose is to frighten off foreign capital”.

The NDP members are trying to install a process that would ensure we would go back 30 or 40 years, because they are against trade. They are against investment. They are against development of the country.

Every single decision we will make here will be in the best interests of the country.

* * *

HEALTH

Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, rare diseases affect the lives of thousands of Canadians. They can be life threatening, debilitating, or a serious chronic condition. Unfortunately, they can be very difficult to study and treat. Although thousands of Canadians suffer from these, current Canadian drug regulations do not provide these patients with the best opportunities to access the therapies they need.

Could the Minister of Health give the House an update on what our Conservative government is doing to help Canadians suffering with these diseases?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health and Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government cares about families who are dealing with rare diseases and disorders.

Canadians dealing with rare diseases often have difficulty in accessing the information and medication they need. That is why today I was pleased to announce that our government will introduce a new approach that will improve the development and authorization of drugs for rare diseases. These changes will benefit patients and their families by making it easier to access treatments for these diseases.

Our government will continue to show leadership and take action on issues that are important to Canadians.

* * *

[Translation]

PORT OF MONTREAL

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let me get the ball rolling. I know that the Port of Montreal board of directors appoints the president, but that did not stop some of the Prime Minister's advisors from making some calls and twisting some arms to get the Conservatives' hatchet man appointed. And who was this ideal candidate? Robert Abdallah, who is facing some serious allegations of misappropriation of funds as part of an inquiry that is currently under way.

The question remains: why did the Prime Minister's Office want Robert Abdallah to be appointed president of the Port of Montreal?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is the board and not the Government of Canada that appoints someone to this position. Why is the member asking questions about appointments that we do not make and that were not made?

[English]

The real question he should be answering is why it is that for over nine years he gave money to the hardest line separatist party in Quebec and its predecessor party, a party that says in its declaration of principles that Québec solidaire opts for sovereignty, and he now refuses to renounce those donations and stand up for Canada. He should answer that.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

• (1455)

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. member for Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie.

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice: Mr. Speaker, I now understand why the member for Nepean—Carleton likes asking questions. He is preparing for his opposition role in 2015. But today, it is up to him to answer questions.

The facts remain. Twenty million tonnes of goods pass through the Port of Montreal every year, and the Prime Minister's Office chose someone who appears to be involved in a bunch of suspicious situations to oversee all that. The Conservatives' fingerprints are all over this.

Once again, what were the true intentions—

The Speaker: The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, before forming a government, we answered a very simple question: do we believe in Canada? Yes, here in Canada we believe in Canada.

[English]

That is a question you have to answer before you form government. If you want to sit in the cabinet of Canada, you have to believe in Canada. Stand up and answer that question, please.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. I will remind all hon. members to address their comments through the chair and not directly at one another.

The hon. member for Timmins—James Bay.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): There we go, Mr. Speaker. We ask a very straightforward question about the relationship between the Prime Minister's Office and Robert Abdallah, who has been named in a corruption scandal in Montreal, and instead of answering, the government hides behind the member for the riding of dodging, ducking and making things up. Is this the accountability the Conservatives promised Canadians in 2006?

I will go back to simple facts here. In 2006, key Conservative insiders promoted Robert Abdallah as their choice for the Port of Montreal. Fortunately, the board pushed back.

What was the connection between the Prime Minister's Office and Mr. Abdallah? Why did the Conservatives want him to get this prime patronage position?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, only for the NDP would it be a scandal when somebody does not get appointed. Only that party would ask us about appointments that we do not have the power to make.

Speaking of ducking and dodging, those members did not answer the question about their own illegal union donations, \$340,000 of which were accepted and then covered up.

Why will NDP members not stand now to redeem themselves and state that they will support the Conservative bill now before the House of Commons to bring transparency to the way unions spend their workers' money?

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there they go again. The Conservatives promised Canadians accountability and instead they are hiding in the fantasy fiction

world of the member opposite with his 50 shades of lame excuses. Let us go back to a little non-fiction here.

The preferred candidate from the Prime Minister's Office was Robert Abdallah. Tony Accurso wanted Abdallah at the port. Mr. Abdallah is named in a corruption scandal in Montreal. Thank god the board said that it was not going to accept pressure from the Prime Minister.

What were these Conservative insiders trying to do by giving Mr. Abdallah this post? It is a simple question.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if the member heard, but the gentleman in question did not get the post and we did not have the power to offer it to him.

It is no wonder that NDP members would try to distract from the issues before the House. One of them gives money to a separatist party and refuses to stand up and support Canada. Another tries to hide the fact that his party accepted \$340,000 in illegal money. All of them refuse to support a bill that would bring transparency so that workers could see how their money is being spent.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' have used a carrot and stick approach in their changes to working while on claim, a little bit of carrot and a whole lot of stick. For some people, the more they make, the more they keep. That is their little bit of carrot. However, for the majority, the less they make, the more the government keeps. That is a whole lot of stick. That is putting the stick to low-income earners in this country, honest people looking for honest work to feed their families.

When is the minister going to reinstate the allowable earnings provision and quit putting the stick to low-income Canadians?

● (1500)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we have a tremendous number of employers looking for workers and they are having a problem hiring those people because the EI program, as it has stood for many years the way the Liberals designed it, has discouraged people from working.

The goal of our working while on claim pilot project is to encourage and help Canadians pursue and accept jobs in their area that will make them better off.

We will continue working toward that goal, because we want to make sure that when people work, they are better off and so are their families and their communities.

Oral Questions

[Translation]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this week, the Assembly of First Nations is holding a special meeting on education. Instead of investing in educating children on reserves, the minister put out a press release citing incorrect figures. Only one in three first nations students graduates from high school, and this government is only making matters worse.

When will this government tell us the truth and give these children a fair chance?

[English]

Hon. John Duncan (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is exactly what we are intending to achieve. We want the same outcome for first nation students as we have for other students.

Every year we invest \$1.7 billion in education for over 117,000 first nation students on reserve. Yesterday, I announced \$275 million that will further the education outcomes of first nation students.

I would add that since 2006, we have completed 263 school projects, including 33 new schools.

* * *

RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, sadly last Friday, the Ontario Northland passenger train made its final voyage through northern Ontario. It was the Ontario Liberal government that killed the train, but all across Canada the Conservative government is walking away from crucial railway infrastructure. This is limiting access to important economic corridors.

Contrary to the Minister of Industry's comments a few questions ago, it is evident that it is the Conservatives who are against development in Canada.

Why are the Conservatives imitating the McGuinty Liberals? Where is their plan for passenger rail in northern and rural Canada?

[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, our government has invested more in infrastructure than any other government in the history of this country. Of course, all infrastructure is being analyzed and reviewed in partnership with the companies that use that infrastructure. In order to be able to continue to operate, these companies need clients, passengers. We regularly analyze the services that are offered throughout Canada. We will continue to support infrastructure development.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have seen VIA Rail's plans. CN recently announced that it plans to shut down a stretch of track between Moncton and Bathurst, even though the company is making \$2.6 billion in profits. What does this mean? It means the end of passenger and freight trains. The entire economy of northeastern New Brunswick will be squeezed dry. What about regional economic development?

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Yvon Godin: Mr. Speaker, it sounds like there are wolves in the House. The members need to be called to order.

The business community and local politicians oppose this plan.

Will the Minister of Transport take action to protect the economy of northeastern New Brunswick?

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 amount of bulk product transported on that line has decreased considerably since 2008. The government is not to blame for this. That is just business; it is the global economy, supply and demand for various products.

This is a business decision made by CN. We are in talks with the province and with Canadian National to envision the future. However, clearly, the government cannot replace every business that uses those lines. We will do our job.

* * *

[English]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to be a member of the Standing Committee on International Trade, and today we celebrate the 25th anniversary of one of the world's most important partnerships. Thanks to a visionary Conservative government, Londoners and all Canadians today enjoy the vast benefits of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

This agreement has evolved into the most successful economic relationship the world has ever seen. Thanks to this ambition, Canada and the U.S. now trade \$1.3 million in goods and services every minute.

Would the Parliamentary Secretary please share with the House how our government is building on this success?

● (1505)

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, that is a great question by the member for London West and I thank him for his hard work on the trade committee.

One in seven Canadian jobs now depends on trade with the United States, but sadly if the New Democrats had their way, this would all disappear. Canadians know that they opposed NAFTA, our greatest free trade success story. They have consistently opposed opening new trade markets for our exporters ever since, and they even oppose trade with Norway.

Try as they might, the New Democrats cannot hide from their anti-trade record.

FOREIGN INVESTMENT

Hon. Geoff Regan (Halifax West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government has put thousands of jobs and critical foreign investment at risk by failing to strengthen our net benefit rules. It promised two years ago to make the process more open and transparent, but decisions are still being made on the Prime Minister's whim.

Instead of shrouding the CNOOC-Nexen decision in secrecy, why does the government not listen to Canadians, lay the details on the table and let everyone judge whether it is a good deal for Canada?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government will act in the best interests of Canada. We have improved the act over the last years, including in 2007 issuing guidelines for state-owned enterprises; in 2009, adding more provisions for national security interests; and in 2009, increasing transparency and the ability to communicate, and the same in 2012.

This transaction will be scrutinized very closely. However, I must remind the House that under the previous Liberal government not a single deal was turned down.

* * *

TRANSPORT

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we are all excited to have the Pan Am Games in Toronto in 2015. What I would like to know is who on the other side of the House has a vision for the city after the two-week sporting event?

It is great that Scarborough is getting an aquatic centre, but what is the point if no one can get to it? Scarborough, like most of the GTA, is stuck in traffic.

Therefore, as the government invests in the Pan Am Games, will it also finally commit to giving Toronto the transit investment that it needs?

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, a big difference between our government and the member's party is that it wants to decide on behalf of the provinces and cities. We will never do that.

We have supported transit all across Canada with the gas tax fund. We have transferred a lot of money to the municipalities through the provinces in support of that. We are building a new infrastructure plan. They all know that we will be delivering it very soon. For the details of where we are going to get the money, we will have to wait for the budget. Everyone knows that.

However, the member can be sure that we will support transit across the country through the infrastructure—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, during the 2011 election campaign,

Oral Questions

the NDP campaigned with a \$21 billion carbon tax that would raise the price of gas, raise the price of groceries, and raise the price of electricity. This was despite the fact that Canadians rejected a carbon tax in the 2008 campaign. A carbon tax would be really punishing in a vast northern country like Canada.

Can the Minister of Natural Resources please inform this House how we will stand up and make sure that a carbon tax is not implemented on the people of Canada?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government will continue to stand up against the NDP's job-killing carbon tax, which will increase the cost of gasoline, groceries and electricity. Our government has been clear that we will never put a tax on carbon.

Canadians can continue to count on our government to act in their interests and defend them against the high tax, high spend NDP and its anti-job and anti-growth ideological obsession.

* * *

[Translation]

CLUSTER MUNITIONS

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is important to recognize the damage to civilian populations caused by cluster munitions during armed conflicts and even for years afterwards.

This afternoon, the Minister of Foreign Affairs will appear before the Senate committee. We know that Bill S-10, which would ratify the convention, has major flaws.

Will the minister point out these flaws in committee and commit today to addressing them?

• (1510)

[English]

Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our legislation fully implements Canada's commitments to the convention and is in line with key allies, including Australia and the United Kingdom. The Canadian Forces will make it a policy to prohibit its members from using cluster munitions, including our members serving on exchange with allied armed forces. This legislation preserves Canada's ability to work alongside our allies.

Routine Proceedings

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the European Union free trade agreement may be finalized soon. Despite the potential repercussions of this agreement on Quebec's economy and culture, supply management and government procurement, the federal government still refuses to reveal the concessions it is preparing to make. The Government of Quebec is concerned, and rightly so, by the lack of transparency in the negotiations and is asking for the truth about the remaining grey areas.

Will the Minister of International Trade and Minister for the Asia-Pacific Gateway undertake to be transparent by providing all the information Quebec needs to protect its interests?

[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 CETA negotiations, the comprehensive economic and trade agreement with the European Union, are the most open and transparent negotiations in the history of this country.

The hon. member needs to speak to his colleagues in Quebec. They have been supportive of this agreement from the very beginning. There are ongoing negotiations, both with the provinces and the municipality. They continue to be supportive of this agreement.

* * *

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of His Excellency U Wunna Maung Lwin, the Minister of Foreign Relations of Burma.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order arising out of question period today. At the end of my point of order, I will be seeking unanimous consent to table a critical document.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture repeatedly stated a lack of support for a bill from the official opposition New Democrats. That is, in fact, in the Senate and it is a bill that we support sending to committee and wish to strengthen.

It is critical that we use question period for what it is intended. The government has chosen consistently to back itself into a corner in a scandal of its own making and then, out of that corner, repeat mistruths in the House time and time again.

I ask for the unanimous consent of the House to present, in both official languages, the Senate Progress of Legislation document that clearly outlines that Bill S-11 is in the Senate, not before the House,

and is supported by the official opposition, which we seek to strengthen for the protection of Canadian consumers.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to respond to that point of order, I simply stated what the member's agriculture critic stated publicly.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

[Translation]

PETITIONS

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition signed by 1,023 people from Acadie—Bathurst who are calling on the government and Parliament to oppose Bill C-38—which was already passed—and its provisions concerning the power to define “suitable employment,” the power to define “reasonable and customary efforts to obtain suitable employment” and the creation of a social security tribunal. These provisions will impoverish the entire economy of our country and punish seasonal and regional workers. These measures do not improve access to employment insurance or the matching of workers’ skills with job vacancies.

• (1515)

[English]

PENSIONS

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I stand today to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Random—Burin—St. George's who are calling on the government to reverse its decision to raise the age of eligibility for OAS from 65 to 67. We are talking about the most vulnerable in our society. In 2009, 4.6 million Canadians received OAS and 1.6 million received the GIS. That number will not be any less as we have an aging population. Seniors are trying right now to make ends meet. It will be no different a year from now, 10 years from now or 50 years from now.

The petitioners are calling on the government to reverse this decision, do the right thing and have the age of eligibility for OAS remain at 65.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition signed by hundreds of people all over British Columbia and the Lower Mainland who petition the House to save the Coast Guard station at Kitsilano. They note that this is one of the busiest search and rescue stations in the country where highly trained crews of the Canadian Coast Guard conduct an average of 300 professional rescues each year, saving hundreds of lives. In addition, these crews prevent many more emergencies through such activities as voter education, pollution response, aid to navigation maintenance and escorting large ships through congested port waters.

I would also point out that recently at the UBCM city councils all across British Columbia expressed their concern about this and passed a resolution calling on the House to save the Kitsilano Coast Guard station.

INCOME TAX ACT

Mrs. Patricia Davidson (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to present a petition signed by many members of my riding requesting Parliament not to pass Bill C-377.

RIGHTS OF THE UNBORN

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36, I am pleased to present a petition from a large number of Prince Edward Islanders.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons in Parliament to assemble 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 to reflect 21st century medical evidence.

CANADA DAY

Mr. Chris Alexander (Ajax—Pickering, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present a petition on behalf of 34 Canadians, including many from my own riding of Ajax—Pickering, calling upon the government to celebrate Canada Day on July 1 every year to ensure that it is not a floating holiday, regardless of whether July 1 falls on a Sunday or not.

It is an important issue for those who are otherwise sometimes obliged to work on Canada Day, a great central national holiday where all Canadians should have the opportunity to celebrate with their families and to put down their tools.

EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

Mr. Dennis Bevington (Western Arctic, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish to present a petition from my constituents to the House of Commons and Parliament assembled.

We, the undersigned residents of Canada, draw the attention of the House to the following: freshwater is essential for life and vital to social, spiritual and economic well-being of Canadians; Canada's Experimental Lakes Area is a unique, world-renowned facility for freshwater research and education; and since 1968, ELA has been a global leader in conducting all ecosystem experiments that have been critical in shaping environmental policy and understanding human impacts on lakes and fishes.

Therefore, the petitioners call upon the Government of Canada to recognize the importance of the ELA to the Government of Canada's

Routine Proceedings

mandate to study, preserve and protect aquatic ecosystems, reverse the decision to close the ELA research station and continue to staff and provide financial—

The Speaker: Order, please. I will just use this opportunity to remind members that it is not the practice to read the petition but just to provide a brief summary.

The hon. member for Ahuntsic.

[*Translation*]

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour for me to present today a petition calling for financial support for Development and Peace. This petition also reminds us that Canada must contribute 0.7% of its GDP to overseas development assistance and give priority to funding NGOs that have lost the support they were receiving from CIDA.

• (1520)

[*English*]

JUSTICE

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce two petitions.

The first petition is from numerous constituents in my riding and from right across the country who are asking for justice for Paul Temelini. This individual has had an ongoing legal dispute with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that has caused his family undue hardship, burden and financial distress.

The petitioners are asking for the government to look into this matter and resolve it in a timely manner.

GASOLINE PRICES

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition I wish to present is signed by hundreds of my constituents asking for some type of protection from gas price gouging that is happening in northern Ontario.

ACCESS TO MEDICINES

Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition on behalf of Canadians, most of whom are from the beautiful city of Saskatoon, calling upon the government to support Bill C-398.

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have the privilege of tabling two important petitions on behalf of my constituents and other citizens of Canada.

The first petition, signed by many of my constituents, calls upon the government to restore full funding to the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace.

Routine Proceedings

The petitioners note that the government committed to increasing foreign aid but cut development assistance by a further 10% in budget 2012, making us among the lower donor countries.

[*Translation*]

These cuts have forced organizations such as Development and Peace to significantly reduce the scope of their activities.

The petitioners are also calling on the government to reaffirm its commitment to humanitarian aid.

[*English*]

EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from Canadians in southern Ontario who have expressed grave concern regarding the government's decision to close the Experimental Lakes Area research station near Kenora, Ontario, where the ELA is a one-of-a-kind global leader in environmental research and has played a key role in shaping national and international environmental policy.

The petitioners note—

The Speaker: Order, please. Once again, I will just use this opportunity to again remind members to provide a brief summary, not to read the entire petition.

The hon. member for Thunder Bay—Superior North.

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions today.

The first petition is from residents of Kenora, Ontario, who are very concerned about the government's announced closure of the ELA, the Experimental Lakes Area. It is a unique area, studying lakes, rivers and fish.

The petitioners join over 24,000 other Canadians in this petition.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, my second petition is on behalf of people from across Canada, including Alberta, Ontario and P.E.I., in support of my cell phone freedom bill, Bill C-560, which they feel takes an important step to providing more consumer choice and promotes competition in the domestic wireless market by unchaining owners from anti-competitive network locks and not allowing them to switch carriers, get full value when selling their phones or using local SIM cards when travelling abroad.

EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I bring forward a petition in regard to Canada's leading freshwater research station.

Since 1968, the ELA has been a global leader in conducting whole ecosystem experiments that have been critical in shaping environmental policy and understanding human impacts on the lakes and fish.

QUESTIONS PASSED AS ORDERS FOR RETURNS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if a revised response to Question No. 745 originally tabled on September 17, 2012, could be made an order for return, this return would be tabled immediately.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[*Text*]

Question No. 745—**Mr. Philip Toone:**

From fiscal year 2010-2011 to the current fiscal year, what is the total amount of funding that the government had provided, each year, in the riding of Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, by department or agency, initiative and amount?

(Return tabled)

[*English*]

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

MOTIONS FOR PAPERS

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I beg the indulgence of the House to introduce a private member's bill. Unfortunately, I was on the phone when the time for private member's bills came up and I missed the opportunity to introduce my private member's bill.

I seek the unanimous consent of the House to introduce a private members' bill.

• (1525)

The Speaker: Does the hon. member have the unanimous consent of the House to revert to introduction of private members' bills?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

* * *

VETERANS REVIEW AND APPEAL BOARD
REPLACEMENT ACT

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-447, An Act respecting the repeal and replacement of the Veterans Review and Appeal Board Act.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleagues on both sides of the House for their unanimous consent to introduce the legislation.

S. O. 52

Basically, this is a one-page bill that is, quite simply, for our veterans, military and RCMP in this country. I am sure I speak on behalf of all members who want to ensure that our veterans get the benefits they require in a quick and expedient manner to ensure they can get on with their lives after service to their country.

The bill basically says that the Government of Canada must, in consultation with Canadian veterans and organizations, develop new legislation to repeal and replace the Veterans Review and Appeal Board Act in order to establish a new and simplified regime that incorporates a medical, evidence-based, peer review process for decision-making regarding veterans' entitlements under relevant federal statutes, and may introduce that legislation in the House of Commons within three days of when this act comes into force.

Once again I thank all members of the House for the opportunity to introduce this legislation.

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

* * *

REQUEST FOR EMERGENCY DEBATE

FOOD SAFETY

The Speaker: The Chair has a request for an emergency debate from two members. I received the first notice from the hon. member for Guelph, so I will hear from him now.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise today pursuant to Standing Order 52 to request an emergency debate on a matter of vital importance to all members of the House and to Canadians across the country: the largest recall of meat in Canadian history following on the heels of an E. coli contamination at XL Foods facility in Brooks, Alberta.

Across the country 1,500 different meat products from XL Foods in Alberta are being pulled off store shelves and the number of sick Canadians, now at 23, is rising. Yet just a week ago the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food rose in this place to trivialize our concerns and state wrongly that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency had the situation under control and that none of the meat from the plant had made it to store shelves.

As members are aware, Standing Order 52 provides that the House can adjourn to hear an emergency debate on a subject that falls within the scope of the government's administrative responsibilities that relates to a matter of genuine emergency and will not be brought before the House in a reasonable time by other means.

It is clear from the timeline of action, two weeks to act on a threat and then two more weeks to finally acknowledge there was one, that neither "reasonable" nor "timely" are watch words for either the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food or the Minister of Health on protecting Canadian consumers from the E. coli 0157, the same pathogen that killed seven people and made thousands of others ill in Walkerton, Ontario.

As an agency of the Government of Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, its protocols, actions and inactions are clearly within the scope of the government's administrative responsibilities and our scrutiny as legislators. More important, public safety and order are among our most sacred and important trusts. In our 2009

report on the listeriosis crisis that claimed 23 lives on this minister's watch, Sheila Weatherill wrote:

As much as there is a legal obligation to uphold the laws and regulations governing food safety in this country, there is a moral duty of care to consumers - especially the most vulnerable. Safeguarding Canadians must be at the centre of the consciousness and collective actions of all those involved in food safety.

Unfortunately, despite repeated requests for actions and answers from the Prime Minister, the minister and his parliamentary secretary, we are hardly further ahead now than we were back in 2008 when the agency and the government similarly lacked urgency, preparation and the ability to communicate vital information to the Canadian public and we in the House as its representatives.

Seemingly more concerned with damage control on the public relations front than the health and safety of Canadians, the government has not made available its minister for questioning this week. Instead, we are left with the cold comfort of talking points about sufficient resources, made irrelevant by the fact that we are presently in a food safety crisis.

That they refuse to table the names, locations and roles of inspectors is an affront to the House and second only to the clear conclusion that regardless of the number of inspectors, the government is not dedicating sufficient resources to our food safety.

As more and more Canadians fall ill and the recall expands to every province, territory and now 41 states across the U.S., as more meat is being removed daily from shelves in stores across the continent, it is vitally urgent that you, Mr. Speaker, grant this request for the House to adjourn in order for us to give this urgent matter the full consideration it deserves.

• (1530)

The Speaker: The hon. member for Welland raised the same topic, so I will give him the floor very briefly before I make a decision.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, indeed, I did send a letter to suggest we have an emergency debate today on this topic.

I will go back to what the criteria are in O'Brien and Bosc for the benefit of members. It has to be a genuine emergency. What we have seen as the biggest meat recall in our country is a genuine emergency and it does not have an opportunity, either through an opposition day or a take note debate, to have that possibility happen. That is no longer available to us, as far as an opposition day or a take note debate are concerned.

That is why it is essential that we have an emergency debate. Next week is a riding week, so we will not be in this place and that would mean it would be the week after before we would have another opportunity and further down the road.

Government Orders

Today when the president of CFIA decided to try to tell Canadians something, he was herded away by the minister's staffer to ensure no information was forthcoming. This is the place from which information must come for Canadians and we would respectfully ask you, Mr. Speaker, to grant that emergency debate.

SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I thank both members for their interventions on this case and for raising this with the House. I find that it meets the test under the Standing Orders and we will schedule the emergency debate for after private members' business today.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

FASTER REMOVAL OF FOREIGN CRIMINALS ACT

The House resumed from September 24 consideration of the motion that Bill C-43, An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in relation to Bill C-43, An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, legislation which will impact on the lives of many of my constituents in Mount Royal and which will also have an important impact on the Canadian immigration system overall.

In presenting the bill, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration offered several justifications for the bill, some of which appear reasonable at first glance in their response to admittedly legislative gaps and policy concerns. In this regard the minister began by noting that the bill would “narrow the breadth of the inadmissibility provision for espionage to focus on activities carried out against Canada or that are contrary to the interests of Canada”.

He then continued, noting that the bill “would permit the temporary entry of persons with an inadmissible family member” before adding that the legislation also would provide “express authority for the Minister of Public Safety to grant ministerial relief on the minister's own initiative” and thus would as a whole “strengthen the integrity of the system and protect the safety of Canadians”.

At first glance, all of these are supportable notions. We do not want to exclude those who spied or worked on behalf of allies. We do not want to deny someone entry if he or she is innocent of any wrongdoing but have an inadmissible family member. Nor do we want any convoluted or unclear process for ministerial decision making in this regard. Yet the bill goes above and beyond these simple and seemingly agreeable propositions. Indeed, if the bill only did these three things, it would perhaps even enjoy the unanimous support of the House.

However, the legislation goes beyond this, granting powers to ministers in ways that may breach the charter and changing some of the protections currently afforded by both domestic and international law. In particular, the minister's outline of the two major changes contained in Bill C-43 warrant individualized attention and critique from a juridical perspective. I will seek to organize my remarks

around the same points that the minister adduces in support of these changes.

First, the minister noted that “the bill will create a new authority for the Minister of Citizenship who will be able to deny temporary resident status to foreign nationals for up to three years based on public policy considerations”. The problem is that there are no criteria respecting what are public policy considerations. What factors will be considered by the minister? When will the determination be made in the application process? What checks are in place to ensure this provision is neither misused nor abused. Indeed the minister himself acknowledged the delicacy, to use his own term, of this authority and invited colleagues and members of the opposition to suggest such criteria either by way of regulation, amendment, or otherwise support content into this rather vague and elastic term.

As a matter of fundamental fairness, persons must be informed of the case to meet and be allowed to present evidence in their favour. By allowing determination on unknown allegations, with a questionable if not elastic standard, namely that of public policy considerations, we are investing the minister with an authority that could end up being discriminatory and otherwise arbitrary and capricious in its application.

Simply because the minister contends that the power would be used sparingly does not mean that it passes constitutional muster. There must be some check, some appeal, some review of the exercise of authority and I am hopeful at committee this section may be amended, as the minister himself acknowledged and invited such amendment, to at least require notice to applicants of the considerations at issue when this section is invoked.

The second change held out by the minister is that “the bill seeks to lower the current threshold to bar access to the Immigration Appeal Division for serious criminality from a minimum sentence requirement of two years to a sentence of six months”.

It is troubling enough that the government speaks of anything netting longer than a six month sentence as “serious criminality”, let alone the denial of remedial relief in this regard. One who obtains a sentence for making a recording in a movie theatre, an offence which can net a two year sentence under section 432 of the Criminal Code, is hardly one who should be denied access to an appeal of a decision that he or she should be put immediately on a plane back to another country, one where the person may not have been to in years, where the person may have no ties, simply because the minister has ordered the person deported.

In this regard, one must note the title of the bill, which is as prejudicial as it is presumptive and where the very title of the legislation is intended to be probative of the *raison d'être* of the legislation itself. I am speaking to the reference to swift departure of foreign criminals act.

Government Orders

•(1535)

This is not unlike the approach that was taken with respect to the Safe Streets Act. A title does not in and of itself validate legislation. By characterizing the legislation as being the “faster removal of foreign criminals act”, it does not make it necessarily pass constitutional muster. A title does not make constitutionally suspect legislation valid nor does it transform bad policy into good policy.

[*Translation*]

The people affected by this bill are permanent residents of our country and newcomers. They came here legally after going through a process that requires, among other things, a criminal background check.

An entire community will be affected by these measures, and it is unacceptable to characterize that community the way this bill does and the way the minister did during his presentation to the House.

[*English*]

New immigrants to Canada are active members of their society. They pay taxes and contribute positively to the country's economy. They must be treated fairly and with respect. Indeed, immigrants, as all members of the House know, play an extremely important role in our country's history. They are an integral part of our cherished multicultural mosaic. On a personal note, I am extremely proud to be able to represent one of the most ethnically diverse ridings in the country.

Simply put, the government has not presented the House with any evidence of a higher level of criminality among immigrants to Canada as compared to citizens. Nor has it presented evidence that somehow a sentence of six months plus a day is in and of itself “serious criminality”.

While my colleagues have listed some of the offences for which one might get a sentence of longer than six months, offences which a reasonable person would hardly view as serious, the bigger problem is that the assumption is that a sentence necessarily reflects severity. In a period when the government is intent on ushering in new and longer mandatory minimum sentences, it can hardly be said in the Canadian justice system that there is necessarily a correlation between the length of a sentence imposed by a judge and the severity, let alone the evil of the act itself.

There is a related note here that must be made with regard to sentencing. The minister noted:

—we have noticed across the country that courts are often using two years less a day to penalize individuals for their crime. At the same time it obviously changes the aspect of that criminal conviction, because it is less than two years, and therefore the scope of the current legislation does not allow us to pursue those individuals for the purpose of getting them out of the country and deporting them.

The suggestion is that judges somehow sentence offenders to two years less a day so that one would not be deported under the current statutory scheme and that it is in fact the intention of the judiciary itself in these regards. However, the truth of the matter is that two years is a dividing line between offences served in provincial versus federal institutions.

In other words, a judge is not sentencing someone to two years less a day because he or she feels the offender should not be

deported. That is not something for the judiciary to consider in a criminal case. Rather the two years less a day sentence allows for the criminal to be incarcerated in a provincial rather than a federal penitentiary.

Indeed, in this regard I would invite the government to submit any evidence it has that any judge has ever taken into account deportation risk in assessing the sentences. It is not a factor under the Criminal Code and surely the government would appeal such a verdict should it have been handed down in that manner. It is simply irresponsible to impute to the judiciary a motive in sentencing where there is no evidence in fact or in law that it has indeed adopted this as its *modus operandi*.

Returning to the bill before us, the premise is that we must remove foreign criminals faster. Yet, as I noted, the foreign criminals at issue here are really permanent residents and new Canadians. Their crimes may not be all that serious. If the government seeks to ascribe to them the level of “serious criminality”, they would be deprived of a remedy to challenge the summary deportations themselves.

When we think of serious criminality, we think of murder, sexual assault and other violent acts. I do not dispute that there are some committing these despicable acts who may be immigrants to Canada, as well as citizens committing such crime. However, the most serious of all crimes, mainly war crimes, crimes against humanity, let alone that unspeakable crime of genocide, is not something we see addressed in this proposed statute. I believe this point warrants some discussion in this matter.

•(1540)

In this regard, may I turn my attention to the war crimes and crimes against humanity program.

Since its inception in 1997, the war crimes program has provided a means of prosecuting international crimes domestically, under the principle of universal jurisdiction, which underpins our war crimes legislation and the implementation of our international treaty obligations.

In doing so, Canada sends a powerful message that not only will our country not serve as a base or sanctuary for war criminals but such war criminals are on notice that they will enjoy neither immunity nor impunity for their international criminality, which transcends borders and jurisdictions.

It is regrettable that the funding for this program has not changed since its inception in 1997. At a time when the government is talking about getting tough on foreign criminals, it is not, regrettably, addressing the problem of foreign war criminals here in Canada and ensuring that they are brought to justice here in Canada.

Rather, we see the problem with the bill now magnified in this regard to how the government treats war criminals, namely through their wholesale deportation. Yet this is not an appropriate alternative to domestic prosecution for war criminals, for they may never face justice in their home countries. Indeed, their home governments may provide protection from prosecution and they may even be rewarded for their criminality. It is our responsibility, both domestically and under international law, to break this cycle of impunity.

Government Orders

At a time when the government purports to be concerned with foreign criminals who enter our country, should this not be the time to reinvigorate the support and funding provided for the war crimes and crimes against humanity program?

These are the real foreign criminals, not Canadian permanent residents. For all the government has claimed that the opposition is soft on crime, why are the Conservatives arguably so soft on war criminals and war crimes?

Again, the point here is that deportation and removal are not necessarily solutions to the problem at hand, and in some cases, returning someone to their country of origin may make things worse.

Another flaw of the bill is that it does not make clear the Canadian obligation, as affirmed by our courts again and again, not to deport to situations of torture or terror. Problematic as it may be to return a permanent resident to a country with which he or she may not have had any contact for years and may no longer have any ties, it is much more problematic in cases of people who came as refugees to Canada before claiming their permanent residency status.

In this regard the removal of recourse to the immigration appeal division is particularly problematic. Indeed, it should be noted that we hold specific international legal obligations under the UN Convention against Torture, to which Canada is a signatory. Article 3 of that convention states:

• (1545)

[*Translation*]

Article 3

1. No State Party shall expel, return ("refouler") or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.
2. For the purpose of determining whether there are such grounds, the competent authorities shall take into account all relevant considerations including, where applicable, the existence in the State concerned of a consistent pattern of gross, flagrant or mass violations of human rights.

[*English*]

While I understand the concern and desire to limit paperwork and resources devoted to claims that will not succeed and I understand the concern that protracted levels of appeal at times burden our system, efficiency cannot replace fundamental rights, particularly those that are protected by treaty. Indeed, the rights at stake here are of the utmost, critical importance.

For permanent residents, such as those who came here as children and for whom Canada may be the only country they have ever known, the decision to return them could prove fatal. Decisions in this regard must not be made lightly, require a full and fair consideration of the facts and cannot be rushed in the interest of political expediency, nor can they ignore the very real dangers that exist.

Lest anyone question whether this is a very serious risk, look at what happened just last week in the case of Fatemeh Derakhshandeh Tosarvandan. While the Canada Border Services Agency has agreed to look at new evidence into the case of her failed refugee claim, there was a brief point where it appeared Canada would send this refugee claimant back to Iran, even though she could face death by stoning.

After repeated pleas by her lawyers and two scheduled deportations that were subsequently cancelled, officials finally notified her lawyer that they would grant her a pre-removal risk assessment.

These cases arise and it must be clear that in all circumstances that Canada, as a matter of law and policy, will not deport to torture or terror which, as the courts have also affirmed, includes deportation to the death penalty in any form.

To conclude my remarks in the time remaining, we all support the idea of creating an efficient and effective immigration process. We support what the minister has said about supporting the integrity of the process itself, but this must not come at the expense of our democratic values, our constitutional rights or international legal obligations. Our government must be open and accountable. Ministerial discretion in a democracy must be exercised with transparency, accountability, in compliance with the Constitution and not shielded by elastic and amorphous terms such as public policy considerations.

The government has yet to justify the primary legislative changes accomplished through the bill in any compelling way. Its advancement only continues to create prejudicial fallout for immigrants, and also prejudicial fallout with respect to the imputations to the judiciary of prejudicial decision-making, let alone breaches of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

I am all for immigration reform. Some of the minister's reforms have been welcome. In past Parliaments I have stood with my Liberal colleagues in supporting some immigration legislation offered by the Conservatives, yet this legislation in its present form is constitutionally suspect. It will invite constitutional challenges at the taxpayers' expense as the government seeks to advance that which breaches constitutional requirements for procedural fairness on the one hand and respect for our international obligations on the other.

What is enshrined in the charter and the related duty of procedural fairness are not merely privileges. They are rights that deserve protection and promotion, and the Canadian Parliament should be at the forefront of those seeking such protection for the benefit of all Canadians.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am also a product of the family reunification provisions of the Canada immigration act. I came to this country in 1980. Back then it took about three years to process an application. I was able to get into elementary school and high school. It benefited me as a person to learn the language at an early age.

Government Orders

In the last 10 years under the Conservative government the wait list has grown to the point where it takes eight or nine years for someone to sponsor parents and young people to this country. I would not have benefited under the Conservative government's track record. I would not be where I am today had I not been able to come in a fairly short period of time. We have seen a freeze on parental applications and such.

Instead of vilifying newcomers to this country, should the government not be working to fix the immigration system?

• (1550)

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Mr. Speaker, I can corroborate what the member said. My constituency office has one of the largest immigration practices in this country. We deal all the time with issues relating to family reunification. We deal with issues with respect to temporary visa applications and applications respecting refugee status and the like. Regrettably, whenever we have these bottlenecks, the bottlenecks end up being prejudicial to the applicants and effectively prejudicial to Canada itself, because we delay and sometimes end up even denying access to our country to those who could make an ongoing and enduring contribution to our society.

I believe the government does want to address some of these concerns that are causing these roadblocks in process and the like. The minister has attempted to do that. Regrettably, with regard to this legislation, the emphasis has been put on reforms that not only do not address those roadblocks but at the end of the day will end up breaching requirements of procedural fairness domestically and also prejudicially affect our international obligations.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-43, An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, concentrates more powers in the hands of the minister by giving him the authority to rule on the admissibility of temporary resident applicants. Furthermore, the minister can declare a foreign national to be inadmissible for various reasons. That worries me a bit. This concentration of power in the hands of the minister is a systematic pattern in the Conservatives' bills.

Is my Liberal colleague as concerned as the NDP that this bill and others concentrate more powers in the hands of the minister?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Mr. Speaker, yes, that does worry me, and I expressed my concerns in my speech.

Not only does the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism have too much power, but so does the Minister of Public Safety. They have too much power without accountability.

I believe that the minister himself recognized that the text of the bill is problematic. He invited the opposition to propose amendments, and that is what we must do to improve the bill.

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the presentation by my hon. colleague. I would like to congratulate him for his well-thought-out arguments.

I notice that Bill C-43—he can tell me whether or not he agrees with me—moves completely away from what we should be doing. It does focus on an existing problem, but one that only concerns a minority of refugees. It seems that they want to focus on the

criminals when much more needs to be done to restore balance to this immigration bill.

I would like to hear what my colleague has to say about this shift, and whether or not he agrees with me.

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Mr. Speaker, I agree.

I think the proposals included in this bill are hurting immigrants and communities.

• (1555)

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a problem with the changes to the act. Currently, the minister has the obligation, following a request by a foreign national, to look at the humanitarian aspects of the situation of a foreign national deemed inadmissible on grounds of security or violations of human or international rights.

However, once Bill C-43 comes into force, the minister will no longer be responsible for taking into account humanitarian grounds. Yet in many cases, when individuals make a refugee claim or apply for permanent residence, humanitarian grounds are critical.

Could the Liberal member tell us what he thinks of the fact that the minister will no longer be responsible for considering humanitarian grounds?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Mr. Speaker, that is why I gave the example of the Iranian woman. They were prepared to deport that immigrant, regardless of the problems deportation to a country where her life was in danger would cause.

I think it is necessary to keep humanitarian grounds in Canada's immigration process, as suggested by the hon. member.

Mr. Robert Aubin: Mr. Speaker, I want to be as clear as I can.

Does the hon. member feel that, with Bill C-43, the government is using a cannon to kill a fly and that, in so doing, is completely overlooking the imbalances found in this legislation?

Hon. Irwin Cotler: Mr. Speaker, the problem is that the government has treated some groups, such as permanent residents and immigrants, as if they posed a threat to Canadian security.

We have to consider the true scale of this issue and not frame it as a criticism of permanent residents as if they were responsible for security breaches in Canada.

That is why there must be processes in place to protect their rights. We must give them the means to defend their rights. We must not give the minister excessive power to make a decision that would violate the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms at the national level or our international obligations.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would first like to say that I will share my time with the talented member for La Pointe-de-l'Île, who is new to the House and is doing an excellent job. She will speak second.

Government Orders

I will start by saying that we are at second reading of a bill and we are of course talking about the principle of the bill. The NDP supports the principle that those found guilty of a violent crime must face consequences with respect to their admissibility in Canada. In light of this principle, we could support this bill.

When this bill is referred to committee and is at third reading, we will have to point out its flaws, as my colleague from Mount Royal and our immigration critic, the member for Newton—North Delta, mentioned. We already see that there are flaws. We can support the principle, but we will have to address some of the flaws in this bill.

First and foremost, I must say that the government's record on immigration shows a huge lack of the responsibility that we should be seeing from a government.

• (1600)

[*English*]

I will give just three examples. I have been in the House now for eight years and I have seen over that eight-year period a very clear deterioration in the level of services provided to new Canadians and in the responsiveness of our immigration system.

I am proud to say that my riding of Burnaby—New Westminster is the most diverse riding in Canada. Over a hundred languages are spoken in Burnaby—New Westminster and every major faith is found in my riding. In a very small area of square kilometres, from the Fraser River through to Deer Lake, we see a diversity that goes even beyond that in other ridings, like Surrey North. I know the member of Parliament for that riding feels there is a lot of diversity there, but Burnaby—New Westminster certainly is the most diverse, with Surrey North very much up there in terms of diversity.

Back in 2004 the concerns were about delays in the system, the delays around family sponsorship and visitor's visas. The issue of temporary foreign workers had not really come to the fore because at the time there was still a very clear emphasis within the system on ensuring that Canadians, the residents and people living in the community, were going to work. Now eight years later there has been a very clear deterioration. It has happened because of cutbacks, mismanagement and the inability of the government to handle the immigration file effectively.

That is why when we see bills like this come forward, as my colleague from Trois-Rivières just mentioned, we see them as akin to a cannon going after a fly. Even though we can support the principle, we are seeing a lot of work going into expanding the powers of the minister when, under the existing powers and responsibilities of the minister and the framework of the ministry, things are clearly not working. Therefore, we see this as a political document that is being brought forward with a whole number of weaknesses. The government is not dealing with the fundamental problems that we are seeing now, particularly in regard to new Canadians in the immigration system.

Let us look at those three examples that I cited back from 2004 and where we are today. We are in a climate where over the last six years, 400,000 more Canadians joined the unemployment rolls. We have seen more and more part-time work. We have lost half a million manufacturing jobs. We have actually seen an erosion in the average family wage in Canada. The middle class is eroding every year and

its losing about 2% of its purchasing power, so its wages are actually being forced down.

Even though the government likes to make up figures for some kind of job and economic record that really come from science fiction, the reality is that most of the jobs created in our growing population are part-time or temporary. We have replaced full-time family-sustaining manufacturing jobs with temporary and part-time work, and people are trying to cobble together a number of different part-time jobs to try to make ends meet.

In the midst of this, we have seen an unprecedented expansion of temporary foreign workers. These workers are brought in and are not subject to our health and safety standards. We have seen so many cases of abuse in British Columbia and right across the country. Temporary foreign workers are simply being pulled away from the health and safety standards that we have, are paid far below our Canadian standards, are given no rights and are sent home at the end of whatever contract they have. This explosion of temporary foreign workers is something that we see everywhere, whether in construction projects where these workers are housed in poor living conditions or the local Tim Hortons where they are brought in and put into very difficult conditions.

I will give an example. I know of a case where temporary foreign workers were brought in to work at a business in one particular area for a per diem. Because there was no inspection process, no oversight whatsoever, those temporary foreign workers then had to pay an extraordinary compulsory amount to their employer to sleep in a bed in a small basement at night. In other words, they became indentured servants where they were ordered to spend all of the money they earned in the day on astronomical fees for their poor living arrangements. When they tried to move out, the owner told them they would have to keep paying the hundreds of dollars they were being charged every week for their accommodation, even though they were no longer sleeping in those tiny little beds in the basement. That is just one example of the many abuses we are seeing.

Under the current government there has been a widespread explosion of temporary foreign workers being brought in with no monitoring, safety standards and oversight provided, or responsibility taken by the government. That is simply not reflective of Canadian values. That is not reflective of building the kinds of communities that we want to see. It is not reflective of Canada's tradition, wherein new Canadians come here and join our communities, bring their families, contribute and work hard, and as a result the whole community and whole country prospers. This is just one aspect of what has been a very meanspirited approach by the government not in keeping with our fundamental values.

Second is the waiting list for family sponsorships. With a pen the government has simply ripped away and cast out those who have been waiting years, sometimes for up to a decade. The government has said it is starting over with the sponsorships, but what about those hundreds of thousands of people who were waiting?

Government Orders

Third is the whole issue of visitor visas. It has become a daily challenge for any new Canadians who want to have their family to visit them in Canada for births, funerals, marriages and special events. Visitor visas are routinely denied for the most spurious of reasons.

What we are seeing under the government is a failure in the immigration system. The government brings forward legislation that is problematic and riddled with a series of holes and problems. A few minutes ago, my colleague from Mount Royal pointed to possible constitutional challenges.

There is a whole range of special powers given to the minister. It is very clear to us that the minister does not deserve those powers.

Though we may be in favour of the principle of the bill, it has to be reworked at committee. It has to be reworked so that it is actually in Canada's interest.

Above all, the government finally has to start coping with the fact that it is in government, and take responsibility and fix all of the problems that new Canadians are experiencing with the immigration system. It has to get to work on this. We are hoping that with pressure from the NDP, it will finally do just that.

• (1605)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I can assure the House that the constituents of the riding of Burnaby—New Westminster have been well-served over the last eight years.

The member said that over the past several years there has been a deterioration in the immigration file. I wonder if he could point out what has deteriorated and what the Conservatives have done to the immigration file over the last six or seven years.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, the member for Nickel Belt has been a very strong representative for northern Ontario in his years in the House, which I know he will continue to be.

I talked about temporary foreign workers and the egregious striking out of those who have waited years to be sponsored to come to Canada.

I want to address the third issue, the temporary visitor visas. We are talking about Canadians who have decided to establish themselves in Canada. All they are asking for when they have a special ceremony for a happy occasion like a wedding or the birth of a child, or a sad occasion like a funeral, is to have their families, loved ones and friends overseas come to visit. Time and time again, tens of thousands of times a year, the government refuses them the opportunity of being with their families, loved ones and friends at critical moments in their lives.

What the government does every day is to treat new Canadians like second-class citizens, when it denies them the ability to be with their loved ones, even for a week. I find the government's record on immigration deplorable when we look at how it hits new Canadians every day who have decided to build a new life in Canada and who want to build that new life without being cut off from their families, friends and loved ones for the rest of their lives. That is indeed what is happening.

There have been cases where people have re-applied half a dozen times and the only reason they were refused is that they did not have

a travel history to Canada. That is the only reason. How can they get a travel history to Canada if they are not allowed temporary visitor visas to be with their loved ones here in Canada?

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative immigration policy focuses less on family reunification and human considerations and more on the economy. Consider their immigration policies for temporary workers, who come to the country under rather questionable conditions. What does my colleague think?

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, please allow me to wish the hon. member for Hochelaga a happy birthday; today is her birthday. As usual, she is spending the day working for her constituents in Hochelaga.

The hon. member just raised a very good point. Temporary workers who come to Canada do not have the same rights as Canadians when it comes to workplace health and safety, nor do they have the same standard of living and wages as other Canadians. The worst is that they make their contribution to Canada and, afterwards, they are sent home. Furthermore, the government has made it harder for families to be reunited in Canada.

This really goes against Canadian values. One of the first things we are going to do when we come to power after the election on October 19, 2015, will be to rebuild a system that this Conservative government will have ruined.

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise in the House today to speak on Bill C-43. As the hon. member said, this is second reading and, at second reading, members express support for a principle, an idea. It is the same, for example, as negotiating in international gatherings. This might even serve as a little lesson for the Conservatives. Initially, we agree on a principle, not on a treaty or a piece of legislation. So let us discuss a principle here.

Certainly, New Democrats recognize the importance that Canadians attach to their security. We are here to protect the security of Canadians. No one will question that, certainly not the government.

I want to work with the government to ensure that no criminal can gain any advantage from a process and that the process remains just, impartial and fair. I should point out that those words are from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. So I am not inventing Canadian values just for the purposes of my speech. Those are the words used to describe our justice system: just, impartial and fair.

We agree on the principle of holding criminals responsible for their actions, of finding them guilty of the crimes they have committed, and of having them suffer the consequences. But we have to reflect on the subsequent process and the values and principles associated with that process. That is precisely why we are here today. We have to ask ourselves which image we want to project, how we want society and people to perceive our system.

Government Orders

Bill C-43 amends a significant number of items. It is important to highlight them. I will begin by pointing out the items that are on the table for discussion. Then I will provide my opinion and make some suggestions to the government.

First, it is important to say that the bill concentrates more powers into the hands of the minister, as if he did not already have enough by virtue of all the bills he has introduced since the election of the majority government. The current minister is likely the Minister of Immigration with the most power in Canada's entire history. I would not make that claim unless I knew it to be true.

Clearly, we do not want Canadians or the rest of the world to view our system as one in which a minister can personally and subjectively determine the eligibility of a temporary resident applicant, regardless of the criteria. It is true that our image and our system influence Canadians, but I would like to make it clear to the government, which claims to be removing barriers and opening itself up to the world, that it is not just removing our economic barriers, but it is also showing the world Canada's image, our values and our principles.

As my colleague said, it is important for the government to take responsibility, to respect and show people what we have fought for for so many years. This must be preserved and cherished as a national treasure, like our national parks and our history.

I should point out that discretionary powers are not common practice in Canadian democratic traditions.

It is good for a country, for a government, to aspire—I am using the word "aspire" because I would not want to say that the government succeeded—to lead the world in terms of the economy and investment, but why not aspire to lead the world in terms of compassion, democracy, justice and equality? Why not? I have never heard my colleagues say anything about that.

I would really like them to stop eliminating these values and principles, so dear to us all, from their speeches in an effort to divide Canadians through the politics of fear. I will touch on that a little later in my speech.

• (1615)

I have a good example. When Conrad Black, a convicted felon who was sentenced abroad, wanted to return to Canada, the minister was quick to say that he wanted the case to be dealt with independently by independent officers. This was very clear from the beginning, and that is what the minister said. However, now he wants to decide the fate of any individual on Canadian soil. In my opinion, this is a contradiction. Once again, we see that the government wants to create different classes: friends of the Conservatives and everyone else.

The NDP wants justice and equality for everyone. Criteria that apply to one person must apply to everyone. It is not true that there are different classes of citizens, permanent residents and even newcomers to Canada.

Personally, if I could give the minister one piece of advice, it would be to spend less time organizing press conferences that paint a very negative picture of immigrants. Instead, the minister should use

these policies and focus his efforts on really protecting us from criminals in our ridings, in our streets.

The minister can declare that a foreign national may not become a temporary resident for a maximum of 36 months if he is of the opinion that it is in the public's interest. Thus, the minister may, at any time, revoke a declaration or shorten that period or whatever.

What are the criteria? The discretionary power in question here is not defined and has no framework at all. There is also no appeal process. To whom is the minister accountable? We know how much the Conservatives love to be irresponsible. They talk about responsible ministers and ministerial responsibility. Yet, instead we see quite the opposite from the Conservative government: irresponsible ministers and ministerial irresponsibility have become the new normal in this country.

We are in favour of the principle: criminals who are found guilty must suffer the consequences. However, we are against giving the minister these discretionary powers. We support equality, democracy and justice.

We see here how different our perspectives are. Has it really come to this? Does the official opposition really have to remind the Canadian government what values Canadians hold dear?

What is so unfortunate about the Conservatives' tactic is that they are using fear and playing on the emotions of Canadians—because I know that Canadians are really very passionate people—to introduce somewhat flawed or sometimes even deeply flawed bills. I think that the Conservatives are going in a truly deplorable direction, and I am very disappointed in their lack of co-operation.

The Conservatives are using prejudices and politics of fear to force Canadians to swallow their far-right policies without saying a word. Has it really come to that? Is the role of the official opposition now to remind the government that it does not rule over its own kingdom, but that it represents Canadians? Is this the role of the opposition now? Are we really seeing these types of far-right policies in a country like Canada? I am very disappointed.

We are talking about an optional appeal process. That is absolutely ridiculous. Has it really come to that? Can the minister really decide whether someone is able to appeal or not?

I personally feel that there is a serious problem with that, especially since the bill also removes the responsibility to consider humanitarian circumstances. For example, what will happen with young children who came here at the age of one? They will be deported to a country whose language and culture they do not know and where they could even be tortured. We have obligations to comply with.

In addition, when we look at the definition of serious crime or serious criminality, we see that there is no definition. We are talking about six months or more, whereas it used to be two months or more.

I am really wondering about the Conservatives' new policies on minimum sentences. We have to think about the image we want our justice system to project. Will people have confidence in our government?

Government Orders

I can assure you that the NDP will never violate the values of democracy, justice and equality that Canadians cherish. We are always going to be there to represent the people.

• (1620)

We are not seeking power because we want to rule over our little kingdom, but rather because we want to change things for the better for Canadians.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for La Pointe-de-l'Île for her excellent speech.

I would like to tell hon. members something. When the bill was introduced and given first reading, we had immigrants come to our office, people who had been in our riding for some time, 10 years or less. There was panic. People thought they were going to be sent back to their countries. They thought that the current criteria were no longer in effect. This created fear. There are very few immigrants in my riding, but there are some nonetheless, some 10,000 people, if not more.

The hon. member spoke about the fear that this bill was going to provoke. I saw it in my own constituency. I saw these people come and cry in the office because they were afraid to be sent back to their country. I would like to hear her speak about that.

Ms. Ève Pécelet: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for her question. Actually, this bill is intended to deport criminals who have committed offences that would be punishable under the Criminal Code by a minimum of six months in jail.

With that in mind, they do not even know if sentences of six months or more constitute serious criminality. I am a law student. I am going to get my law degree next week. The Conservatives' definition of "serious criminality" is down the drain. We are talking about fear. They use fear. We often hear the Minister of Public Safety and the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism tell people that the NDP is going to release criminals and that their safety will be compromised if the NDP becomes the government. That is not true. In addition, immigrants, who contribute to the economy, are being treated as though they were not even Canadians.

In fact, the government is really good at dividing. There are the friends of the government and the victims. There are the criminals, women and aboriginals. The government divides people to its own advantage. Divide and conquer is really what the Conservative government is doing now. The government is telling people that they do not deserve its protection and efforts. However, it is a different story for the friends of the government.

People feel marginalized. People feel attacked. They do not even feel at home anymore. They—

• (1625)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. We must allow time for one more question.

The hon. member for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord.

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my NDP colleague was talking about the myths that the Conservatives are spreading about the NDP and our position on this bill. I would really like to make one thing clear.

The NDP recognizes the need for an effective legal system in order to deport serious criminals who are not Canadian citizens. However, the Conservative government is casting far too wide a net with Bill C-43. At the end of the day, this bill targets the majority of newcomers who obey the law and do not commit crimes. That is why the NDP is opposed to this bill.

I would also like to know whether my colleague realizes that this bill attacks the wrong people because, as I mentioned, newcomers who are good people and who obey the law are the ones who will be affected. They are living in fear.

Ms. Ève Pécelet: Mr. Speaker, this bill follows the introduction of a number of bills by the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, who is treating immigrants as though they were in a different class.

I would like to once again remind hon. members of the day when I was in my office and I turned on the television to CBC and saw the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism giving a press conference. I read this caption at the bottom of the screen: "3,000 fraudsters deported from Canada".

The minister has just revoked the citizenship or permanent residence of 3,000 people who had lived in Canada, paid their taxes and contributed to our society, based on mere allegations of fraud or a failure to abide by the Conservatives' system. This shows how the minister's discretion can be dangerous for citizens. A minister must not be given such discretion.

Mrs. Sana Hassainia (Verchères—Les Patriotes, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform you that I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Saint-Jean.

The debate on Bill C-43, dealing with the removal of foreign criminals, is one I am particularly interested in. This is another step in the comprehensive reform of our immigration system that the Conservatives are doing their utmost to undertake. As the stakes are high and as the decisions made in this House will have major repercussions on many people's lives, it is essential to thoroughly study the changes proposed in this bill.

Ultimately, this bill proposes to do away with the control mechanisms that allow the immigration system to respond to exceptional circumstances in a flexible way. Powers are being taken out of the system and placed into the hands of the minister, who, more than ever before, will be able to decide unilaterally what is good and what is not good for individuals and for our country.

I have to say that this trend leaves me confused in a number of ways. My first concern is with the concept of serious criminality. At the moment, as we know, someone who is not a Canadian citizen can be sent back to his country of origin if he is convicted of a crime punishable by two years or more in prison. This is intended to keep Canadians safe, while leaving some room to manoeuvre for individuals making a simple mistake. There is a good balance between compassion and public safety, in my opinion. But Bill C-43 would reduce the prison term triggering deportation from Canada from two years to six months. This would considerably broaden the categories of crimes punishable by removal from our country, pure and simple. I believe that this major change requires more thorough study.

Government Orders

Which crimes would henceforth be considered serious enough to justify deportation? Are there not cases in which deportation would be out of proportion to the offence? I feel that we must think about this before we act, given the dramatic consequences of deportation.

I believe that the government is trying to show its muscle here as it has done with various other bills in the past. This is their nonsense, tough on crime approach. But have the consequences of that approach been seriously studied?

I would like to quote the president of the Canadian Somali Congress, Ahmed Hussien. In describing the potential consequences of Bill C-43, he said that a good number of the people who are likely to be captured by this new law are first-time offenders who, if given a chance, could reform and change their behaviour.

This means that if we lower the bar from two years to six months, we could end up disproportionately punishing people who, although they made a mistake—it happens—are capable of turning things around. Where is the compassion that helped our country become what it is today? I do not see that in this bill.

I must point out that the immigration minister promoted this bill by using examples of extremely dangerous offenders. Of course we all agree with the idea of preventing dangerous people from walking freely in our streets. I am just as concerned as the minister about the safety of my fellow Canadians. I recognize the need to have an effective justice system in order to deport serious criminals who are not citizens.

However, emotion must not win out over reason in such a complex debate. Blindly and indiscriminately lowering our threshold of tolerance without considering each individual's particular circumstances is not a good solution.

Now let us talk about the vast discretionary powers given to the minister. I cannot support the removal of the appeal process for certain people. Furthermore, I cannot agree with giving the minister unilateral power to prohibit a foreigner from becoming a temporary resident for a period of 36 months, if he feels that it is justified by public policy considerations. That power is much too vast and too vague.

In addition, there is a problem with Bill C-43 that the government does not seem to have thought about. We could end up deporting offenders who came to Canada at a very young age and who no longer have any ties to their country of origin. That has happened before. A young person who immigrates at the age of two with his parents has no memories of his country of origin. He considers himself to be Canadian. His friends are here, as are his social network and family. He has gone to school and worked in his community. When he makes a mistake and commits a crime, however, he does not have the same rights as a citizen and risks being deported.

It is not a fundamentally bad concept. We all understand that serious crimes must be punished severely. That is why the rule regarding a two-year prison sentence is justified. However, by reducing that time frame to six months, we run the risk of deporting people who commit relatively minor crimes to countries they do not know.

The problem I have with this bill is not so much its intention, but rather the means it uses. Protecting society from dangerous criminals is one thing; cracking down indiscriminately and imposing disproportionate punishments on anyone who makes a mistake, no matter how minor, is quite another thing. Does the government realize how difficult it might be for someone to be deported to a country they do not know? I urge the government to seriously consider this question. In short, I would like to say this: let us make the system tougher when it comes to removing criminals if need be, but let us not do so blindly.

Another aspect that really worries me is mental illness. The minister does not say very much about this aspect in his press conferences on the bill, but many convicted criminals have mental health problems.

● (1630)

His bill deprives judges of a great deal of their discretionary power to consider the circumstances in which a crime is committed. I do not think this is a good idea.

According to Michael Bossin, a lawyer who specializes in refugee rights and has extensive expertise in that regard, in many cases, people who have mental illness problems often commit crimes when they are not treated. That is a well-known fact. Many convicted criminals struggle with mental illness.

What do we want as a society? Personally, I think proper treatment should be provided to offenders whenever possible. Locking these people up or sending them to their country of origin only covers up the problem; it does not solve it. It means off-loading the problem onto someone else. That is not what I expect from a country like ours.

People struggling with mental illness must receive care, even if they have committed a crime. This is not being soft; it is being compassionate and wise.

Since Bill C-43 practically ignores this troubling aspect of criminal behaviour, we have a right to question the bill's real intentions.

This leads me to my last point. This reform does not seem to be based on any true facts or hard evidence. The government seems to be taking the same approach it used to amend the Criminal Code. It is clamping down without any sense of the outcome.

Can the minister tell us what crimes will henceforth be punishable by deportation? Can he explain why a person with a mental illness would be better off in prison or in his country of origin than at a hospital? Has he calculated the cost of his reform?

The cost associated with Bill C-31, for example, is \$34 million. How much will Bill C-43 cost? We do not know.

Nor do we know the current number of deportations that are the result of a conviction, or how many cases involving a deportation order for a serious criminal offence have come before the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Without such crucial data, how can we assess the potential repercussions of this reform?

Government Orders

I am convinced that it is possible to prevent non-citizens who commit a serious offence from abusing our appeal process without trampling on their rights. Like the vast majority of newcomers, I would like to have a government that is focused on improving the immigration system to make it faster and fairer.

On top of all the questionable changes that I have already mentioned, this government's modus operandi makes me wonder what its real intentions are.

The Minister of Immigration seems to be contemplating a two-tier system. Just look at the treatment Conrad Black received recently. Mr. Black committed a crime for which he served a sentence abroad, but when he wanted to return to Canada, the minister said he did not want to get involved and that the case should be left in the hands of the officials.

However, through Bill C-43, the minister is now asking for much more freedom of action. He also wants to have more discretionary power in order to intervene in cases involving the deportation and entry of criminals. We cannot always get everything we want in life. We cannot call for an independent system one day and ask for vast discretionary powers the next day.

What is good for Conrad Black has to be good for everyone else. If Mr. Black's file is reviewed by officials, then every file should be. In that sense, the proposed reform in Bill C-43 seems out of touch with reality. Does the minister want judges and officials to enforce the rules, or does he want to decide on everything himself?

This doublespeak does not seem very fair to me and makes me wonder about the minister's true intentions.

I am going to summarize my opinions about Bill C-43.

We all want to be tougher on non-citizens who commit serious crimes in Canada. However, like many experts, I am concerned about this Conservative bill that increases the minister's arbitrary powers. Judges will have fewer powers, and individuals who are mentally ill will be treated with indifference. The government is making these changes even though the vast majority of newcomers to Canada are law-abiding individuals who do not commit crimes.

I remember that, in 2006, the Conservative government promised to increase the number of police officers on the streets in our communities. But, for various reasons, the government did not keep its promise. I do not know if that was because the government lacked the will, because it was out of touch with reality or because it had misplaced priorities. What I do know is that the government cannot now make permanent residents pay the price for its inaction. Why not focus once and for all on protecting our communities, rather than on demonizing newcomers? Portraying them as future dangerous offenders, as the Minister of Immigration did in a news conference, is not helping. It looks as though he is trying to divert attention to a certain category of individuals rather than doing something useful.

For all these reasons, I think that Bill C-43 should be studied further in committee. A number of questions and concerns remain unanswered, and the only way to make the right decision is to think more about it.

● (1635)

Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened carefully to the hon. member's speech. Unfortunately, she did not have enough time in 10 minutes to address all the points, but she did talk about the increased penalty for misrepresentation.

When a person receives permanent resident status after filling out a form at the embassy in their country of origin, misunderstandings may occur as a result of cultural differences. We do not see those differences because we live in a country with cultural standards. In some countries, there is a difference between ordinary crimes and political crimes. Some political prisoners or criminals are treated as common criminals. This cultural difference can lead to an inaccurate interpretation and, as a result, to faulty representation, or misrepresentation as described in the bill.

Could the hon. member talk about the potential dangers of increasing the sentence for misrepresentation in cases where there are rather significant cultural differences in the legislation and in the perception of ordinary crime and political crime?

● (1640)

Mrs. Sana Hassainia: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his excellent question. I touched on this aspect without going into too much detail because of the short time I had. Once again, this is about the discretionary power that will be granted to the minister. There will no longer be any humanitarian considerations, which will be a serious problem.

As the hon. member said, in terms of criminal matters, legislation can vary from one country to another. Processing the cases of new residents without having the time to really go over them in depth will be very problematic.

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is something in this bill that I am very worried about. In the name of the national interest, the minister can use his discretion to deny permanent residence to applicants. The concept of national interest has not been explicitly defined. Furthermore, applicants who are denied permanent residence status do not have the right of appeal.

Can my NDP colleague explain why it is important for these people to have access to an appeal process, especially when the department and the minister have discretionary authority? With too much power concentrated in the hands of the minister, there can easily be abuses. I would not be surprised if that were to happen under this Conservative government.

Can she explain why it is important for people to have access to an appeal process?

Mrs. Sana Hassainia: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the question. Giving such discretion to the minister is like giving him a blank cheque and asking him to decide the fate of these people. He can decide to deport them without giving them the fundamental right to appeal. I believe this is a violation of the rights of these residents, who, as was said, contribute to our economy and are members of our society. They have the right to appeal a decision that they could believe is arbitrary.

Government Orders

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I know that the member has worked with criminals and that she is very knowledgeable about this subject. I will ask her a quick question. How does she think this bill is going over with groups that closely work in the area of social reintegration?

Mrs. Sana Hassainia: Mr. Speaker, this is a real disaster. The Conservatives advertised this bill by using very high-profile cases of notorious offenders, who are very few in number. These cases are very well known because of the broad media coverage they received. This raises some concerns for individuals and for the organizations that my colleague just spoke about. Unfortunately, this issue must be examined more closely before decisions can be made.

Mr. Tarik Brahmi (Saint-Jean, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very honoured to speak today on behalf of the people of my riding about Bill C-43, An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, the short title of which is the Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act.

One of the reasons why I am interested in this subject is because I am an immigrant myself. My father was also an immigrant to the country in which I was born. Before becoming a Canadian citizen, I was a permanent resident. I heard the many very relevant comments of my colleagues in this regard. However, we have not yet heard from the Conservative members, which is unfortunate.

Like my NDP colleagues, I have many reservations about this bill. First, there is the short title: the Faster Removal of Foreign Criminals Act. Instead, we should talk about serious foreign criminals.

Bill C-43 refers to two types of people who do not have Canadian citizenship. There are newcomers, who are called “foreign nationals”, and long-time residents with permanent resident status. Permanent residents are in a different category than so-called foreign nationals because, under the bill, permanent residents can be temporary workers or students, for example.

• (1645)

[*English*]

One thing that seems to come back in all the pieces of legislation that have been introduced since the beginning of the 41st Parliament is the constant need to give more discretionary power to the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism. Frankly, this is a trend that I find very threatening as a citizen. Every time that a power is taken from the courts and judges and given to a minister, we have cause for concern. What is strange is that many reports have demonstrated that the law is not properly and fairly applied because of the lack of resources in the ministry and in the agency in charge of immigration.

One of the problems with this bill is the removal of the right to appeal in certain circumstances. That is dangerous, in my opinion. Obviously, nobody likes long appeal processes that last for years. However, the other extreme, which is, namely, no right to appeal, is certainly no better. I see nothing in this bill to prevent the possibility of abusing the system and this is something I would like the justice committee to be able to modify at the next stage.

[*Translation*]

This is another immigration bill. That is quite strange, because the government tells anyone who will listen that its priorities are the

economy and job creation. As it says, it is focused like a laser on the economy and job creation.

We have a number of reservations. Reports from the Auditor General have uncovered serious problems in the processing of immigration files. Specifically, there have been problems with transparency and with information management at the Canada Border Services Agency.

The Auditor General has mentioned that the act is applied randomly and that is very troubling. It is all the more troubling given the Conservatives' current tendency to concentrate decisions more and more in the hands of a few responsible people. But they are reducing the staff tasked with conducting the investigations that lead to the conclusions that allow those decisions to be made.

When you are a member of an immigrant community, as I am, you are inevitably very sensitive to the way in which immigrants are treated when they are convicted of crimes, especially those that the government is now calling serious crimes.

So that brings us back to the famous definition of a “serious criminal”. Previously, it was someone sentenced to more than two years in prison. From now on, it will be someone sentenced to more than six months in prison.

While, in theory, serious criminals are the only ones responsible for their actions, in practice, we see that crimes committed by a handful of people actually spill over onto the entire immigrant community to which those people belong. One of the direct consequences is that, more than anyone, immigrants themselves want a justice system that is effective, but above all fair, a system that ensures that crimes committed by a handful of people, however serious they may be, do not reflect negatively on an entire community that is living and working honestly and taking its place in the economy of this country.

I would also like to refer back to Bill C-31 that was brought before us in the spring and that received royal assent in June. Once again, it is very important not to lump together immigration and crime, not even by association, because too often, even systematically, when immigration and crime are lumped together, the result is xenophobia. Xenophobia is a real cancer for any open society, like ours in Canada, and for any country that has decided to use immigration as a way to replace the generations that have passed on.

Generally speaking, it is risky to examine an immigration issue in the context of a bill that targets a minority made up of foreign criminals among which only a very small number are serious criminals.

Let us now talk about the right of appeal. A number of my colleagues pointed this out. In a process—and this is a concern everyone shares—whenever the opportunity to appeal is removed, the image of justice is damaged and there is a risk of adding to the cynicism of a segment of the population that does not believe in our justice system.

There is a risk to the credibility of the justice system. That is why I am rather critical of this bill. There is a risk of adding to the cynicism of a segment of the population that does not believe in justice or in the justice system.

Government Orders

There has also been much talk about the case of new permanent residents who are awaiting their citizenship. There is also another situation that we do not talk about, namely that of people with dual or multiple citizenship. Quite often, people, immigrants, will not apply for Canadian citizenship. This is not because they do not want to participate in the life of our country but, rather, because they already hold citizenship that they would automatically lose if they took Canadian citizenship. This decision not only has consequences for the person who decides not to take Canadian citizenship, it also has an obvious impact on the children who did not make that choice, who did not have the opportunity to express their views on the fact that their parents decided not to take Canadian citizenship.

I am going to conclude by saying that, for all these reasons, we will support Bill C-43 at second reading. However, given the strong reservations that we have, we will give the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights an opportunity to hear expert testimony that may support the serious concerns raised by my colleagues and myself during this debate.

• (1650)

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his speech. He said that this bill may have very harmful consequences. We are talking about people who arrived here when they were very young and who do not know their country of origin. We are also talking about people who have mental health issues and who are often overly criminalized.

We also know that the government wants to shorten the length of the sentence for sending these people back to their country of origin. A person who must serve a six-month sentence can therefore be sent back to his country of origin. The crimes in these cases are not very serious. These people can be reintegrated into the community and can still contribute to Canadian society.

Could the member speak to us about a particular case in his community? Should the Conservatives resolve other immigration issues before taking care of this one?

Mr. Tarik Brahmī: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Rivière-des-Mille-Îles for her question. She actually referred to many different cases. I am going to talk about a case that I found particularly touching, given that I come from an immigrant community. As I said, some people choose not to apply for new citizenship because they would lose their former citizenship. Consider two well-known cases: Indian and Chinese citizens. Those are the two most populous countries in the world. And the legislation in those countries does not recognize dual citizenship. So if Indian and Chinese citizens apply for another citizenship, they will automatically lose their original citizenship. We can understand that some immigrants have a sentimental attachment to their citizenship by birth.

As the hon. member pointed out, when they come to Canada, some parents with young children choose not to get this new citizenship. As a result, if one of the parents commits a serious crime, he or she can be deported. This means that children who have not reached the age of 18 can also be deported from Canada even though they are not responsible for their parents' actions.

• (1655)

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his response.

The well-being of children is very important to me as well. There is a reason why my own bill has to do with youth bullying.

What concerns me about Bill C-43 is that the physical and psychological health of these young people, these children, could be compromised, especially if they arrive as refugees as a result of a dangerous situation in their country of origin. We all know that, for humanitarian reasons, some desperate people arrive here under circumstances that the government would consider unacceptable or even illegal.

What does my NDP colleague think we can do to improve this bill? How can we ensure that these young people and these children will be protected and treated humanely by the Government of Canada?

Mr. Tarik Brahmī: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member for Chicoutimi—Le Fjord touched on something very important. One of the reasons we support this bill at second reading is that it recognizes the people who have come here as a result of illegal activities, but who are in fact victims of human trafficking. This aspect is clarified somewhat in this bill, and that is positive. It is absolutely one of the reasons we support this bill at second reading.

However, let us not forget that it is often children who are the victims of trafficking and other criminal activities that we unequivocally condemn. This bill should be amended to ensure that we do not criminalize children who have been victims of trafficking or a criminal activity and who entered the country as a result of that criminal activity. We must eliminate any chance of sending them back to a country where they will be mistreated again and where they might end up back in the hands of the same traffickers who brought them to Canada illegally.

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Before we resume debate, I would inform hon. members that we have passed the five-hour mark since the first round of debate on the bill that is before the House. Accordingly, for each of the interventions from this point on, the period allowed will be the usual 10 minutes for speeches and 5 minutes for questions and comments.

[*Translation*]

Ms. H  l  ne Laverdi  re (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleagues for their encouragement. I am very pleased today to have the opportunity to comment on this very important bill.

I would like to start by stating some principles. First, I agree that an efficient judicial system is needed so that we can deport serious criminals who are not Canadian citizens. This is a principle on which everyone here is in agreement. No one has a problem with it.

Government Orders

Another point on which almost everyone is in agreement—at least, I hope so—is that it has to be done fairly, humanely, justly and intelligently. And therein lies the problem. I will give a few examples. We want fairness, but one of the problems with this bill is that, once again, it broadens the minister's discretionary power. This is the trademark of the Conservative government. We have to wonder what discretionary power the Conservatives will give to the minister next.

I will not go back over the details of these measures because several of my colleagues spoke about them earlier. The real problem is this trend of giving more discretionary power to the minister.

That is what happened with the list of safe and unsafe countries to which refugees can be deported. Once more, the minister was given more discretionary power instead of calling on a panel of experts. That is dangerous. I do not know why the government wants to put its own minister in a situation like that. In international negotiations, other countries will put pressure on the minister to remove them from the list of unsafe countries. The minister will no longer even be able to point to the fact that an independent body draws up the list.

The government is always giving itself more discretionary power while reducing the flexibility that judges have. That is a problem because the minister exercises those discretionary powers behind closed doors. The minister makes the decisions; we do not know the details and we have no information. Conversely, when a judge renders a decision, the information is public; it is much more open. Reducing judges' flexibility and giving ministers more discretionary power compromises the transparency of the process. My fear is that fairness will be affected as well.

According to the bill as drafted, the minister is not even required to take humanitarian circumstances into account. Need I say more? This bill lacks compassion.

With respect to simple natural justice, the right to appeal for crimes where the sentence is longer than six months is being removed, whereas previously an individual could not appeal when the sentence was longer than two years. This issue needs to be considered in a broader context. On the one hand, harsher minimum sentences are being imposed, and judges cannot reduce those sentences based on the specific circumstances of the case. On the other, the period beyond which an individual does not have the right to appeal is being reduced from two years to six months.

● (1700)

To fully understand what this means, we need to stop and think about specific cases. I am trying to imagine a young Vietnamese boy who came to Canada when he was seven or eight years old and who started going to school and playing hockey with his friends. Now he is 19. He goes to CEGEP. At some point, he does something stupid. I am not saying that it is right, but he does something stupid. Under the new legislation and under the new regime, it does not have to be a huge mistake. He gets six months in prison. He is deported. He does not have the right to appeal. He is sent back, without his parents, to a country where he knows no one, where he may no longer have any family and where he barely speaks the language. Is it fair and humane to treat people like that? I am not so sure.

We have to be smart about this. Let me provide an example that is based on comments made by Ottawa lawyer Michael Bossin. He says that under this new bill, a judge no longer has the discretionary power to take into account the nature of the crime and the context in which it is committed. That is important. A judge no longer has the right to make his own ruling based on what he sees. A judge will not be able to look at the context in which the offence was committed and take into account, for instance, the possible mental illness of refugees or permanent residents from war-torn countries. Mr. Bossin said that in many cases, those people committed crimes when they were not being treated for their mental illness.

The government recently made cuts to refugee health care. Organizations such as RIVO, in my riding, provided psychological care to refugees from war-torn countries and refugees who were tortured or suffered other atrocities. It provided psychological counselling to prevent refugees from going off the rails and becoming criminals. These services are being cut, which hinders prevention. At the same time, cases of mental illness will not be taken into account. Nonetheless, refugees who are provided with these services can often turn their lives around.

Speaking of being smart about this, it should be noted that there is a lack of data and basic information. We are being asked to speak to this without having all the basic information on the annual number of cases, the seriousness of the cases, etc.

I want to point out that the government, in fact, is trying to punish everyone because of a handful of problem cases. That is what the Conservatives always do when it comes to refugees and immigrants. The striking thing about this bill is that its title refers to foreign criminals, as though permanent residents were foreigners. They are not all foreigners.

There was a well-known case in Quebec recently. A Portuguese man had permanent residence status and had been living in Quebec for 35 years. He was married and had children and a house. I would not call someone like that a foreigner. I would call him a non-citizen, a permanent resident, but not a foreigner. I have a good friend originally from England who just got married. He has a job and a circle of friends. He volunteers. To me, he is not a foreigner. I have a real problem with the short title of this bill.

As usual, the Conservatives are being stubborn and inflexible. They are being inflexible towards others, because they themselves always have discretionary power. There is no rigidity for them.

More importantly, they are refusing to attack certain known sources of the problem and are slashing health care spending for refugees and refusing to work on what we can do to better integrate immigrants, who have so much to offer to Canadian society.

* * *

● (1705)

[English]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Gordon O'Connor (Minister of State and Chief Government Whip, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I ask for unanimous consent for the following motion. I move:

Government Orders

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, during the debate tonight pursuant to Standing Order 52, no quorum calls, dilatory motions or requests for unanimous consent shall be received by the Chair.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Does the chief government whip have the unanimous consent of the House to move the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Members have heard the terms of the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

FASTER REMOVAL OF FOREIGN CRIMINALS ACT

The House resumed consideration of the motion that Bill C-43, An Act to amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, be read a second time and referred to a committee.

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my colleague said that the government is currently finding it difficult to integrate newcomers into our country. That is my opinion as well. In six years, the government has not been able to develop a program for integrating professionals from other countries.

Can my colleague talk some more about the fact that the government is unable to do its job with respect to this issue?

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the question because it is actually a very important point. The vast majority of Canadians came to this country through immigration. Immigration has always made this country strong and vibrant. Our true wealth consists of the people who have come here from all over the world.

At present, this government is reacting as though people from other parts of the world were essentially a threat rather than an asset. I would like us to work on bills such as this one, but we must not forget the main issue: integrating immigrants.

In my riding, in Montreal, we constantly see skilled professionals who could contribute to the economy and Canadian society, but who cannot do so because we are not working hard and collaborating to find a solution to the problem together with other levels of government.

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my parents were immigrants to Canada and they worked very hard to help build this country.

A couple of examples that NDP members have used have been about individuals who come to Canada but choose not to become Canadian citizens.

In one example the member talked about someone who came to Canada at the age of seven but at the age of twenty ran into difficulties with the law.

Another example from the previous speaker was about somebody who comes to Canada but has such an attachment to the country he came from that he chooses not to take out Canadian citizenship, although his kids are Canadian. He gets into trouble with the law and is sent back to his home country.

Is it the position of the New Democratic Party that the value of Canadian citizenship is so weak that the Government of Canada and the people of Canada should continue to carry on their backs individuals who do not make a commitment to this country?

Is it the position of the NDP that those individuals who break the law should not suffer the consequences of not valuing Canadian citizenship enough to take out Canadian citizenship after many years, and of breaking our laws?

Is it the position of the NDP that the value of Canadian citizenship is so low that we should not have laws in place to protect Canadians from coast to coast to coast? Is that what the NDP is saying?

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, I think that Canadian citizenship has enormous worth. That is why for many years of my life I have represented Canada abroad and have been very proud to do so.

However, my colleague's comments say it all when he asks if Canada should carry on its back people who are not citizens. That is the perspective of the government, and that is where it is mistaken. They are not people who we carry on our backs. They are people who contribute to our economy, our society, our culture and our diversity. They are what makes Canada the country that it is.

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. To be clear, people who break the law—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Paul Calandra: I know they do not want to hear the actual truth because NDP members have had a great deal of difficulty with the truth lately, but we—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. It is really just a point of debate. Differences of opinion is what debate is all about but we will carry on. We only have one minute remaining.

The hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie.

• (1715)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, I think the record will show that my colleague first spoke of people who were not taking citizenship and asked if we had to carry them on our back. Then he referred to people breaking the law and asked if those people breaking the law should pay a price. Yes, they should pay a price. If they have to go to prison or pay a fine they should do so, but the assumption always seems to be that it is non-citizens who commit the crimes. We do not have from the government any data or detailed information about whether non-citizens commit any more crimes than citizens.

Government Orders

Mr. Paul Calandra: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. I am not just sure that the NDP members are actually debating the right bill. I wonder if they have actually read the bill and the title of the bill because the bill is about the removing of foreign criminals from Canada. It is not about removing or punishing Canadian citizens. It is not about devaluing the hard work of immigrants like my parents who have come to this country. It is about removing people who have broken the law in this country so that the rest of the country can be safe and secure. That is what it is about.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I thank the hon. parliamentary secretary for his intervention. Certainly the rules around relevance pertain to debate and it is a valid area that could be a point of order. In this particular case, the parliamentary secretary will know that members are given a lot of latitude in terms of how they can bring these ideas together and make them pertinent to the debate and the question that is before the House. We will have to say that we are within the realm of relevance here and it is up to the hon. members to bring those ideas together.

Resuming debate. The hon. member for Honoré-Mercier.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paulina Ayala (Honoré-Mercier, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today in the House to share my concerns regarding the faster removal of foreign nationals.

Since the founding of this country, Canada has been a land of immigrants.

I, myself, am an immigrant, and I understand the many challenges that new Canadians face in integrating harmoniously into their new country, particularly those who arrive as refugees and who leave their countries in distress. Refugees often experience severe cultural shock. This distress is even more painful when they arrive with their children. Often, they have to learn to speak a new language. They have to find a place to live and a job, and the list goes on.

Immigrants who arrive as permanent residents start out differently because they emigrated by choice. However, once they arrive, they have the same difficulties as refugees in finding a place to live, getting a job and having their foreign credentials recognized. They sometimes end up unemployed and living in the most marginalized neighbourhoods through no fault of their own.

For an immigrant, finding housing is not an easy thing. I know from experience. With a family, it is even worse. Parents do not have their extended family to help them. Often both parents have to work and the children go to school.

The shock is even greater when a young person becomes a delinquent. Under Bill C-43, on reaching adulthood, he becomes an undesirable immigrant who has to leave his adopted country.

I am talking here about young immigrants who arrived in Canada at the age of one, three, four or eight, who grew up here and who went to school here. I am not talking about an immigrant who arrived in Canada at the age of 30 with suspicious thoughts in mind. I am talking about young people who became delinquents here in Canada. They went to school here. They should serve their sentence here. They should reintegrate into society as good citizens here in Canada. They are our responsibility as a society because they grew up here, not elsewhere.

We are talking here about a local problem, not an untraditional export. We are sending these delinquents to their parents' country of origin, a country that they are not necessarily familiar with.

We are talking here about people whom we educated and trained and who became delinquents in Canada.

Most newcomers to Canada are people who will obey the law and never commit a crime. That we know.

The Conservatives should put more effort into ensuring that these people are treated fairly and that they can be reunited with their family members. This would really help these families to integrate harmoniously into their new country and to take care of their children when both parents have to work.

I think about my students from the inner city. How many of them do not have a grandmother? It can really help to have a grandmother taking care of the kids after school, because their parents get home late in the evening. The child comes home with a key, opens the door and is home alone. It is easy to get caught up in the wrong crowd on the way home.

The Canadian justice system has a good reputation throughout the world, and I am concerned that we are sending the wrong signal by hastily deporting criminals without proper grounds.

Will we create more injustice by accelerating the process? Do we risk doubly penalizing people who made a mistake—I am not saying that these are all innocent people—but who paid their debt to society?

I would like to talk about two families in my riding. In both cases, Canadian children are being penalized when their parents are deported for a crime they committed at some point in their lives. In many cases it is a double penalty.

● (1720)

For example, a Colombian-Canadian family was forced to take their young Canadian children—this was in the papers—to a country our government was discouraging people from visiting on our travel warnings site. Another case highlights the importance of being reasonable and carefully studying this bill.

Last week a new case came across my desk. A Canadian citizen is concerned about the situation of one of her employees. This employee is at risk of being deported to Vietnam. This man arrived in Canada as a child. He was 8 years old. His parents died on the ship on the way to Canada. He grew up without his parents. He and his brother outlived them. He is now 40 years old and has six children born in Quebec. He is married to a Canadian.

He spent nearly all of his childhood, teen and adult years here. Around the age of 18, he committed crimes and was punished by the Canadian system, which means that he was tried and he served time in prison for his crimes. He served his sentence.

Being in jail got him thinking and he is now back on the right path. Moreover, for the past number of years, he has been telling the story of his life to other young people, in order to help them also get back on the right path. In doing so, he has helped many young people, and several of them can attest to that. He applied for a pardon two years ago, but things are dragging on.

Business of Supply

Recently, Citizenship and Immigration Canada revoked his Canadian citizenship, and a deportation date has already been set. His fate seems already sealed.

He works as the leader of a team specializing in above-ground work related to supply. He is the top-performing team leader in his area. He is a very responsible person and a born entrepreneur. He is resourceful because he can find solutions when conditions are not ideal. He is also very respectful of his employees. Needless to say, he is essential to the company for which he works.

Vietnam is no longer his country. He has been living here for 37 years. His country is Canada. He has six children. One of them has reached the age of majority, but the others are all minors. So this father will be separated from his children. This man will be separated from his wife. He will be separated from his country. This is basically saying that immigrants are second-class citizens.

This example clearly illustrates what we have to be careful about, because Bill C-43 takes away from the minister the responsibility to examine humanitarian and compassionate considerations.

Currently, the minister has the obligation, at the request of a foreign national or on his own initiative, to look at the humanitarian and compassionate considerations related to a foreign national who is deemed inadmissible on grounds related to security, human rights or international rights violations, or organized crime.

If the minister deems it justified, he may grant an exemption for humanitarian and compassionate considerations, taking into account the interests of a child directly affected. However, the new legislation removes that ministerial responsibility.

Why would the government want to divest the minister of the responsibility to take into consideration the children's best interests when a person faces deportation?

• (1725)

[*English*]

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for her speech and for the wisdom that she brings to this issue and to this House.

These issues are very complex. These issues are never black and white. We all have countless cases that come through our offices where flexibility and an understanding of the details of these cases is very important.

I wonder if my hon. colleague could speak a bit more to the need for a system that could respond to the individual cases of sometimes extreme human tragedy and how we need to be very clear and flexible about some of this stuff.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Paulina Ayala: Mr. Speaker, laws provide for sentences for people who commit a crime. But these people must not be punished forever. We want to return them to society. There is a reason why Canada is a country of immigrants. We need people.

Consider the example of the person I mentioned earlier. He suffered. Yes, he made a big mistake. He was sentenced for that, but he has the right to rejoin society. We have to be able to reintegrate people into society. People of faith know that this is fundamental.

The person misjudged, made a mistake and is forgiven. Is that not what we believe?

According to the premise of this bill, we would tell this citizen that he is bad and we do not want him. We want perfect immigrants. At that point, we will define who is good and who is bad.

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I fully understand what the hon. member is saying. What she means is that, if you are a Canadian and you move to another country, you are still a Canadian. If I move to Canada, I am still a citizen of my country of origin, but I am a Canadian and I have to have the same rights as other Canadians.

When you live in a country for 36 years, you might still be Hispanic at heart, but you are a Canadian. Your children are born here. They are Canadians and they have the same rights as other Canadians. That is what we want to safeguard.

Ms. Paulina Ayala: Mr. Speaker, when young people become offenders here, it is society's responsibility to take care of them. We cannot deport people who have become criminals here. Our Canadian society is responsible for people who were not able to integrate their families or to detect illness in their adolescent children. They need special assistance. We cannot tell people that they became offenders even though they came here at a very young age. It is our responsibility. They grew up and were educated here. We accept them and reintegrate them properly into society.

* * *

• (1730)

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—NEXEN

The House resumed from October 2 consideration of the motion.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the New Democratic Party motion relating to the business of supply.

Call in the members.

And the bells having rung:

• (1810)

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

(*Division No. 470*)

YEAS

Members

Allen (Welland)
Ashton
Ayala
Bellavance
Benskin
Blanchette
Boivin
Boutin-Sweet
Brisson
Byrne
Casey
Charlton
Choquette
Christopherson

Angus
Aubin
Bélanger
Bennett
Bevington
Blanchette-Lamothe
Boulerice
Brahmi
Brosseau
Caron
Cash
Chicoine
Chow
Cleary

Private Members' Business

Coderre	Comartin	Holder	James
Côté	Cotler	Jean	Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Crowder	Cullen	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)	Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Cuzner	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)	Kent	Kerr
Davies (Vancouver East)	Day	Komarnicki	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Dewar	Dion	Lake	Lauzon
Dionne Labelle	Donnelly	Lebel	Leaf
Doré Lefebvre	Dubé	Leitch	Lemieux
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)	Leung	Lizon
Easter	Eyking	Lobb	Lukiwski
Foote	Freeman	MacKay (Central Nova)	MacKenzie
Fry	Garneau	Mayes	McColeman
Genest	Giguère	McLeod	Menegakis
Godin	Goldring	Menzies	Merrifield
Goodale	Gravelle	Miller	Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Groguhé	Harris (Scarborough Southwest)	Moore (Fundy Royal)	Norlock
Harris (St. John's East)	Hassainia	Obhrai	O'Connor
Hsu	Hughes	Oliver	O'Neill Gordon
Hyer	Jacob	Opitz	Paradis
Julian	Karygiannis	Payne	Penashue
Kellway	Lamoureux	Poillievre	Preston
Lapointe	Larose	Raiitt	Rajotte
Latendresse	Laverdière	Rathgeber	Reid
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)	LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)	Rempel	Richards
Leslie	Liu	Rickford	Saxton
MacAulay	Mai	Schellenberger	Seeback
Marston	Martin	Shiple	Shroy
Masse	May	Smith	Sopuck
McCallum	McGuinty	Sorenson	Stanton
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)	Michaud	Storseth	Strahl
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)	Sweet	Toet
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)	Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)	Toews	Trost
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)	Mulcair	Trottier	Truppe
Murray	Nash	Tweed	Uppal
Nicholls	Nunez-Melo	Van Kesteren	Van Loan
Pacetti	Papillon	Vellacott	Wallace
Patry	Péclet	Warawa	Warkentin
Pilon	Plamondon	Watson	Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to
Quach	Rae	Sky Country)	Wilks
Ravignat	Raynault	Weston (Saint John)	Wong
Regan	Rousseau	Williamson	Yelich
Saganash	Sandhu	Woodworth	Young (Vancouver South)
Scarpaleggia	Scott	Young (Oakville)	
Sellah	Sgro	Zimmer — 145	
Sims (Newton—North Delta)	Sitsabaesan		
St-Denis	Stewart		
Stoffer	Sullivan		
Thibeault	Turmel		
Valerioté — 125			

NAYS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Aglukkaq
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Allison	Ambler
Ambrose	Anderson
Armstrong	Aspin
Baird	Benoit
Bergen	Bernier
Bezan	Blaney
Block	Boughen
Braid	Breitkreuz
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)	Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Brown (Barrie)	Bruinooge
Calandra	Calkins
Cannan	Carrie
Chisu	Chong
Clarke	Clement
Davidson	Dechert
Del Mastro	Devolin
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)	Dykstra
Fantino	Fast
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)	Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Fletcher	Gallant
Gill	Glover
Goguen	Gosal
Gourde	Grewal
Harper	Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn	Hayes
Hiebert	Hillyer

Nil

PAIRED

The Speaker: I declare the motion lost.**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS***[Translation]***CANADA POST CORPORATION ACT**

The House resumed from September 28 consideration of the motion that Bill C-321, An Act to amend the Canada Post Corporation Act (library materials), as reported (without amendment) from the committee be concurred in.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at report stage of Bill C-321, under private members' business.

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Speaker, if you seek it, I believe you would find agreement to apply the results of the previous motion to the current motion, with the Conservatives voting yes.

The Speaker: Is there unanimous consent to proceed in this fashion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Private Members' Business

[Translation]

Ms. Nicole Turmel: Mr. Speaker, the NDP will vote yes.

[English]

Ms. Judy Foote: Mr. Speaker, the Liberals agree and we will vote in favour.

[Translation]

Mr. Louis Plamondon: Mr. Speaker, the Bloc Québécois will vote yes.

[English]

Mr. Bruce Hyer: Mr. Speaker, I will be voting yes.

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, the Green Party votes yes.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Mr. Speaker, I will be voting yes.

[Translation]

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

(Division No. 471)

YEAS

Members

Ablonczy	Adams
Adler	Aglukkaq
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Welland)
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)	Allison
Ambler	Ambrose
Anders	Anderson
Angus	Armstrong
Ashton	Aspin
Aubin	Ayala
Baird	Bélanger
Bellavance	Bennett
Benoit	Benskin
Bergen	Bernier
Bevington	Bezan
Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Blaney	Block
Boivin	Boughen
Boulerice	Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi	Braid
Breitkreuz	Brisson
Brosseau	Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)	Brown (Barrie)
Bruinooge	Byrne
Calandra	Calkins
Cannan	Caron
Carrie	Casey
Cash	Charlton
Chicoine	Chisu
Chong	Choquette
Chow	Christopherson
Clarke	Cleary
Clement	Coderre
Comartin	Côté
Cotler	Crowder
Cullen	Cuzner
Davidson	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Davies (Vancouver East)	Day
Dechert	Del Mastro
Devolin	Dewar
Dion	Dionne Labelle
Donnelly	Doré Lefebvre
Dubé	Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Dykstra	Easter
Eyking	Fantino
Fast	Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Fletcher
Foote	Freeman
Frote	Gallant
Fry	Ganest
Garneau	

Giguère	Gill
Glover	Godin
Goguen	Goldring
Goodale	Gosal
Gourde	Gravelle
Grewal	Groguhé
Harper	Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Harris (St. John's East)	Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hassainia	Hawn
Hayes	Hiebert
Hillyer	Holder
Hsu	Hughes
Hyer	Jacob
James	Jean
Julian	Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Karygiannis	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kellway	Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kent	Kerr
Komarnicki	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lake	Lamoureux
Lapointe	Larose
Latendresse	Lauzon
Laverdière	Lebel
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)	LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Leaf	Leitch
Lemieux	Leslie
Leung	Liu
Lizon	Lobb
Lukiwski	MacAulay
MacKay (Central Nova)	MacKenzie
Mai	Marston
Martin	Masse
May	Mayes
McCallum	McColeman
McGuinty	McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
McLeod	Menegakis
Menzies	Merrifield
Michaud	Miller
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)	Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Moore (Fundy Royal)	Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)	Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)	Mulcair
Murray	Nash
Nicholls	Norlock
Nunez-Melo	Obhrai
O'Connor	Oliver
O'Neill Gordon	Opitz
Pacetti	Papillon
Paradis	Patry
Payne	Pécelet
Penashue	Pilon
Plamondon	Poilievre
Preston	Quach
Rae	Raitt
Rajotte	Rathgeber
Ravignat	Raynault
Regan	Reid
Rempel	Richards
Rickford	Rousseau
Saganash	Sandhu
Saxton	Scarpaleggia
Schellenberger	Scott
Seeback	Sellah
Sgro	Shiple
Shory	Sims (Newton—North Delta)
Sitsabaiesan	Smith
Sopuck	Sorenson
Stanton	St-Denis
Stewart	Stoffer
Storseth	Strahl
Sullivan	Sweet
Thibeault	Toet
Toews	Trost
Trottier	Truppe
Turmel	Tweed
Uppal	Valeriotte
Van Kesteren	Van Loan
Vellacott	Wallace
Warawa	Warkentin
Watson	Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea
Sky Country)	
Weston (Saint John)	Wilks
Williamson	Wong
Woodworth	Yelich

Private Members' Business

Young (Oakville)
Zimmer — 270

Young (Vancouver South)

NAYS

Nil

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried.

* * *

• (1815)

TRANSBOUNDARY WATERS PROTECTION ACT

The House resumed from October 1 consideration of the motion that Bill C-383, An Act to amend the International Boundary Waters Treaty Act and the International River Improvements Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

The Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion at second reading of Bill C-383 under private members' business.

• (1820)

[*English*]

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

(*Division No. 472*)

YEAS

Members

Abлонczy
Adler
Albas
Alexander
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)
Ambler
Anders
Armstrong
Aspin
Ayala
Bélanger
Bennett
Benskin
Bernier
Bezan
Blanchette-Lamothe
Block
Boughen
Boutin-Sweet
Braid
Brisson
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)
Brown (Barrie)
Byrne
Calkins
Caron
Casey
Charlton
Chisu
Choquette
Christopherson
Cleary
Coderre
Côté
Crowder
Cuzner
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Day
Del Mastro
Dewar
Dionne Labelle

Adams
Aglukkaq
Albrecht
Allen (Welland)
Allison
Ambrose
Angus
Ashton
Aubin
Baird
Bellavance
Benoit
Bergen
Bevington
Blanchette
Blaney
Boivin
Boulerice
Brahmi
Breitkreuz
Brosseau
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Bruinooge
Calandra
Cannan
Carrie
Cash
Chicoine
Chong
Chow
Clarke
Clement
Comartin
Cotler
Cullen
Davidson
Davies (Vancouver East)
Dechert
Devolin
Dion
Donnelly

Doré Lefebvre
Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Easter
Fantino
Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Fletcher
Freeman
Gallant
Genest
Gill
Godin
Goldring
Gosal
Gravelle
Grogulé
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn
Hiebert
Holder
Hughes
Jacob
Jean
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)
Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Kerr
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lamoureux
Larose
Lauzon
LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
Leef
Lemieux
Leung
Lizon
Lukivski
MacKay (Central Nova)
Mai
Martin
May
McCallum
McGuinty
McLeod
Menzies
Michaud
Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Moore (Fundy Royal)
Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot)
Murray
Nicholls
Nunez-Melo
O'Connor
O'Neill Gordon
Pacetti
Paradis
Payne
Penashue
Plamondon
Preston
Rae
Rajotte
Ravignat
Regan
Rempel
Rickford
Saganash
Saxton
Schellenberger
Seeback
Sgro
Shory
Sitsabaiesan
Sopuck
Stanton
Stewart
Storseth
Sullivan
Thibeault
Toews
Trotter
Turmel

Dubé
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dykstra
Eyking
Fast
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)
Foote
Fry
Garneau
Giguère
Glover
Goguen
Goodale
Gourde
Grewal
Harper
Harris (St. John's East)
Hassainia
Hayes
Hillyer
Hsu
Hyer
James
Julian
Karygiannis
Kellway
Kent
Komarnicki
Lake
Lapointe
Latendresse
Lebel
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)
Leitch
Leslie
Liu
Lobb
MacAulay
MacKenzie
Marston
Masse
Mayes
McColeman
McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Menegakis
Merrifield
Miller
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)
Mulcair
Nash
Norlock
Obhrai
Oliver
Opitz
Papillon
Patry
Péclet
Pilon
Poilievre
Quach
Raitt
Rathgeber
Raynault
Reid
Richards
Rousseau
Sandhu
Scarpaleggia
Scott
Sellah
Shiple
Sims (Newton—North Delta)
Smith
Sorenson
St-Denis
Stoffer
Strahl
Sweet
Toet
Trost
Truppe
Tweed

Uppal	Valeriote
Van Kesteren	Van Loan
Vellacott	Wallace
Warawa	Warkentin
Watson	Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to
Sky Country)	
Weston (Saint John)	Wilks
Williamson	Wong
Woodworth	Yelich
Young (Oakville)	Young (Vancouver South)
Zimmer— 269	

NAYS

Nil

PAIRED

Nil

The Speaker: I declare the motion carried. Accordingly the bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

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

The Speaker: It being 6:21 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

CANADA ELECTIONS ACT

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.) moved that Bill C-424, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (contestation of election and punishment), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to speak today to private member's Bill C-424, an act to amend the Canada Elections Act.

The bill would strengthen the federal electoral system to ensure all citizens would have access to due process in the case of contested elections as well as prevent, we hope, the repeat of the potential electoral fraud on a wide scale, which has marred Canadians' confidence in the last general election.

[Translation]

This bill accomplishes two very important things.

[English]

First, it would add the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada as somebody eligible under the law to contest an electoral result. Under the current law, and based upon the prescribed grounds in the act, an electoral district result can only be contested by an elector who was eligible to vote in that district or a candidate who ran as a candidate in that district as well.

As we have recently seen, contesting an election is a very expensive proposition and something many Canadians simply cannot afford. By adding the Chief Electoral Officer to the list of people who can contest an electoral result, we are making it possible for Canadians who cannot afford this process to have access themselves to the courts.

Private Members' Business

We are in no way seeking to alter the burden of proof in contesting a result or changing any other evidentiary requirement. We are simply giving the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada standing to bring an action before the courts, as could any eligible elector or candidate.

[Translation]

In addition, in circumstances where electoral fraud is suspected in more than one riding, this bill will permit the Chief Electoral Officer to better investigate the allegations.

Under the current system, if centralized fraud that affects a number of ridings is committed, Canadians in each individual riding must challenge the election before the courts, still as individuals.

While the act itself may be centralized, the only means available to these people to address the crime is limited to the electoral boundaries.

If the Chief Electoral Officer can challenge all of the electoral results, he or she will be able to ensure that no person or group can hide behind this technical detail.

• (1825)

[English]

This approach is entirely consistent with other electoral systems in Canada such as in British Columbia, Ontario and Nunavut, where the chief electoral officers are able to contest the election result in a particular electoral district.

Second, the bill would simply increase the fines for obstruction of the electoral process, for example, on a summary conviction from currently not more than \$2,000 to not more than \$20,000. For conviction by indictment, as members well know, the current legislation prescribes a fine of not more than \$5,000. This bill would increase that to \$50,000.

[Translation]

Canadians need to trust our electoral system and its integrity. Anyone who tries to undermine that trust and cheat the system must know that the consequences will be significant. The intent of this clause is to provide an even stronger deterrent to people who might think about cheating our electoral system.

[English]

Therefore, two very simple changes are being proposed.

The first aspect is the Chief Electoral Officer will have the ability at law to contest an electoral result in a district. Obviously, this will be done following a thorough analysis by Elections Canada, which is very conscious of the legal requirements of such a contestation.

Private Members' Business

The second aspect of the legislation we are proposing would simply increase the existing penalties. It would not change the nature of the offences. It would not add new offences. It would simply say that if someone is convicted on a summary conviction of election fraud, we think \$2,000 is not the right sanction as a maximum penalty. It should be increased to \$20,000 and the same thing on indictment, from \$5,000 to \$50,000. There is no mandatory minimum prescribed in our changes and our proposals, we are simply increasing the existing penalties for existing offences.

I believe the changes in the bill will strengthen our democracy and help rebuild some of the trust that perhaps has been lost in recent months. The last federal election cast a shadow over a number of electoral districts. Investigations are ongoing in a number of different electoral districts. We think that these changes will ensure that the respect for our electoral system is maintained and that those who seek to violate it would face consequences commensurate with the nature of the offence, that being the undermining of the basic democratic rights of Canadians.

I hope all members of all parties in the House will ultimately support the bill when it comes to a vote. Obviously, should it be sent to committee, I would be willing to entertain amendments or suggestions from all sides of the House in an effort to strengthen the legislation. If there are technical aspects that perhaps can be improved, I would remain very open to the suggestions of my colleagues.

• (1830)

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am grateful to the hon. member who has introduced the bill.

I just have one question for the member. He noted that B.C., Ontario and Nunavut have a similar mechanism. I want to ensure that he has had a chance to determine whether injecting the Chief Election Officer's role into the Canada Elections Act fits with the scheme of the act and the existing roles of the Chief Election Officer, or whether he thinks there might be some reticence on the part of the officer to actually undertake this function given how he might understand the act.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Toronto—Danforth raises a very appropriate question. All we would be seeking to do is give the Chief Electoral Officer the legal standing to contest a result or number of results when he feels an action should be brought before the courts. It is my understanding that in their legislation, Ontario, Nunavut and British Columbia have that authority in the hands of their respective chief electoral officers. Obviously, the discretion would be entirely in the hands of the Chief Electoral Officer should he choose in a particular case to contest a result before the appropriate board or tribunal.

If my colleagues support the legislation and we send it to committee, I would hope the committee would see fit to ask Elections Canada and the Chief Electoral Officer to give us their views of the legislation in committee. If the committee saw fit to make some suggestions following evidence from the Chief Electoral Officer, I would hope that we could all collectively improve the legislation.

However, I think the answer to my colleague's question is quite simple. In no way would this change the spirit or substance of the

act. It simply adds one more person as having the legal grounds, the standing in law, to bring an application before the courts.

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to follow up on the interesting question that the member for Toronto—Danforth just raised. It seems to me that under the existing act the Chief Electoral Officer is an entirely neutral party and does not intervene in respect of any particular player in the political process. If we allow the Chief Electoral Officer the authority to intervene, there would be obvious implications for neutrality in terms of the court case and the political process.

Right now it is the political actors who look after contestations and the Chief Electoral Officer is like a referee or an umpire. I am challenging what the member who spoke just said about that change not influencing the scheme of the act.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Kitchener Centre makes a valid point. In no way would we seek to diminish the neutrality and the confidence that the Chief Electoral Officer has in the eyes of Canadians and in the eyes of the House.

I would remind my colleague from Kitchener Centre that it was the Conservative Party that voted no confidence at one point on another election scandal it was involved in, and that was the in and out scandal. The Conservatives are the ones who voted no confidence in Elections Canada and its Chief Electoral Officer. It certainly was not people on this side of the House.

At the end of the day, Elections Canada has an investigatory responsibility. The Commissioner of Canada Elections himself can make recommendations to the director of public prosecutions around quasi criminal prosecutions for fraud.

The Chief Electoral Officer has an essential role to uphold the integrity of our election system and cannot be simply a silent observer when he feels, in his wisdom, that the courts should decide. He would not decide. The courts would decide ultimately if there has been a fraud. He would simply have the opportunity to bring that case before the appropriate tribunals.

• (1835)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today to explore in more depth the ideas proposed in Bill C-424 by the hon. Liberal member for Beauséjour.

I am also pleased to announce that the NDP will support the bill so that it can go to committee. It raises some valid points, and I would like to discuss them in greater depth.

But I am well aware that anything to do with electoral reform is far from being the most appealing topic. It is not going to grab media attention or put catchy headlines on the front page of the paper tomorrow. But procedural issues are at the root of the democratic system.

I do not promise a colourful speech, but I still believe that the debate today is very interesting and will be able to hold our attention.

Bill C-424 proposes two very different things. But both are trying to better identify and prevent potential breaches of the Canada Elections Act.

Let me explain the situation.

The bill amends paragraphs 500(5)(a) and 500(5)(b), which provide for penalties for specific offences. The offences are: obstructing or delaying the electoral process; offering or accepting a bribe; compelling or intimidating a person to vote or refrain from voting for a particular candidate; acting as an election officer without being one; wilfully making a false declaration; exceeding or evading election advertising expense limits; disclosing the vote of a voter one has helped; intentionally and prematurely spoiling an advance ballot; wilfully failing to declare a candidate elected and finally, wilfully conducting election advertising using government means of transmission.

You will agree with me that these are not choirboy pranks. These are serious offences that undeniably require a degree of premeditation. The word “wilfully” regularly occurs in the list I have just read out, and with good reason. If you show up at a polling station with a baseball bat in order to prevent people from voting, it is not by mistake.

I will now go over the list of people who are liable for the penalties in the act. It is important to name them. They include individuals, voters, election officers, including returning officers, polling companies, candidates, registered associations, party leaders and political parties in general.

All the offences covered by the harsher penalties have to do with wrongdoing that would undermine the legitimacy of the democratic process in Canada.

In an election, there are two types of people. First, there are those to whom the legislation applies, such as candidates, riding associations, leadership candidates, official agents and all those who act directly on behalf of Elections Canada, such as returning officers. Second, there are thousands of volunteers who want to be involved in the electoral process. Those people are indispensable. They are the most valuable resources in an election. The penalties do not apply to volunteers who, unintentionally, make a mistake on an official document or who are not able to apply the legislation to the letter because they do not know it. We need volunteers for our democratic process to work, but they must not be threatened with an election act that could come down hard on them at the slightest error. Those people are protected. The legislation is strict, but it makes a lot of sense and it is applied sensibly.

So the penalties under the legislation only apply to the first category, meaning those who have clear responsibilities set out in the act and who are required to be familiar with the Canada Elections Act.

For the people listening, I will explain that the Canada Elections Act is a document that sets out exactly how to run an election. It is complicated, thorough and constantly being tweaked. The act is also a global benchmark we can be proud of. Representatives of other governments around the world consult it and draw from it. This tweaking is what we are looking at right now.

Ever since Canada came into being, we have learned from our mistakes. Fraud has occurred in the past, and we have always tried to adjust as a result. We need to crack down on fraud and fight it in the future.

Private Members' Business

Since 1992, precisely 68 violations of the Canada Elections Act have led to convictions. Obviously, they vary in seriousness.

Despite everything, we should acknowledge that these violations are occasional phenomena that are rarely successful.

No one is saying that Canada's electoral legitimacy is seriously at risk. The violations that have been punished are serious but isolated. However, I repeat that higher fines may help deter people from breaking the law. There will always be people ready to cheat and violate the electoral process to get what they want. It is too bad, but I am delighted that these incidents remain infrequent.

There have been 68 convicted violations in 20 years, in six federal elections and one referendum. Think about it. There have been six general elections in over 300 ridings, but only 68 convicted violations, which does not mean that we should ignore them, but that we need to look at all ways to crack down on the culprits. That is our job as legislators. As I said last week, too many countries around the world are victims of democratic processes that lack transparency. Canada is still a symbol of democratic transparency and stability. Despite everything we have lost recently, at least we still have that.

● (1840)

At this time, the fines set out in the legislation are not completely absurd, but almost. We are dealing with so-called cerebral offences, and the maximum fine varies between \$2,000 and \$5,000. Everyone here agrees that this threat is not very effective. It is not unlike the requirement to own \$4,000 worth of “lands or tenements held in franc-alleu or in roture” in order to be a senator in this country.

The NDP would like the penalties imposed for violating the Canada Elections Act to be a far greater deterrent. Increasing monetary penalties related to violations of the Canada Elections Act is a valid means of trying to prevent such violations. For the NDP, this is acceptable, but hardly revolutionary.

We are talking about premeditated fraud committed by organized individuals using sophisticated means to break the law. At the same time, these offences seriously undermine not only the legitimacy of the democratic process, but also our own legitimacy as the elected representatives of the Canadian public. It is important to note that Bill C-424 does not create any new offences. It merely increases fines.

I would like to move on to what is new in this bill. It gives the Chief Electoral Officer the authority to contest the election of a candidate if he or she notes any irregularities in the electoral process.

At present, only a Canadian voter in his own riding or a candidate can file a complaint with the Chief Electoral Officer in order to initiate an investigation.

The problem is that this restriction slows down the process. As I mentioned earlier, the Elections Act is a rather complex piece of legislation. We cannot seriously expect all Canadians to know it inside out. Someone might witness an irregularity, but would not notice it for lack of experience.

Private Members' Business

We must remember that the act governs electoral conduct down to the minutest detail. The act is well written and, I will say it again, no one expects every Canadian to readily understand its ramifications and consequences. That was never the intention and that is quite all right.

Take, for example, the robocall scandal, which is still being investigated. It took hundreds, even thousands of complaints to Elections Canada before it became apparent that there was a global and coordinated problem. And that was almost one year after the election.

I do not claim to implicitly know the possible consequences of granting the power of contestation to the Chief Electoral Officer. This amendment to the Elections Act is perhaps a good thing. Rather, it most definitely is. However, we must seek the advice of those who are better informed about such matters.

I want to point out that, to our knowledge, the Chief Electoral Officer himself has never asked for this power. After every general election, Elections Canada prepares a list of recommendations to improve the Elections Act. The changes made by Bill C-424, regarding the powers given to the Chief Electoral Officer, are not the result of a specific request by the Chief Electoral Officer.

That is why the NDP is in favour of referring this bill to committee in order to hear from all the necessary witnesses, such as representatives from Elections Canada. They will be able to share with us their analyses and their recommendations. I hope my colleagues from the other parties will support this initiative.

The Chief Electoral Officer is responsible for enforcing electoral legislation. If he or his staff witness an offence, he should have the legislative tools to act if he has concerns about any aspect of the legitimacy of any election. This would be a rare occurrence—extremely rare. If the Chief Electoral Officer already had this power, that does not mean he would already have used it. However, being the independent and impartial expert that he is, he might notice things that someone with less experience would miss entirely.

Giving the Chief Electoral Officer this power does not bother me. It is a valid question worth pursuing in committee. The hon. member for Beauséjour sees a gap in the legislation that he wants to close pre-emptively. Let us see what the experts have to say about it.

In closing, this bill seeks to deter electoral violations through fines increased tenfold, and to anticipate a possible situation of abuse that may very well never happen.

I support Bill C-424 at second reading to refer it to committee. I am curious to hear what the witnesses will have to say about this.

• (1845)

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I rise to speak to what is an important bill for the government to not only look at but also to speak to as well.

The member for Beauséjour has brought an important issue forward to the House of Commons. If we were to canvas Canadians for their opinions, we would find that it is a topical issue, especially if we look at what took place in the last federal election.

In any given election, issues come up at both the federal and provincial levels, but I will focus my attention on the federal side of things.

We do not have to have a partisan debate per se on this legislation. It is important that we look at a couple of examples. It is important that we recognize that this is long overdue. I do not quite understand why any political party inside the House would oppose something of this nature. We appreciate the fact that the New Democratic Party seems to recognize the value of Bill C-424 and is prepared to support the legislation. I look forward to the government responding to the bill. As the member for Beauséjour has always demonstrated a very open mind when it comes to changing legislation, he would no doubt be open to any concerns the government might have in regard to potential amendments.

We have nothing to lose by allowing the bill to go to committee. I would really encourage members, particularly the parliamentary secretary, to open their minds and recognize that there is a need to move forward on this legislation. We should not be fearful of doing the right thing. Doing the right thing in this particular case would be to support the bill.

I join my colleague from Beauséjour in asking the government to get behind this particular bill and allow it to go to committee at the very least, where we can hear witnesses and different stakeholders express their concerns, and to get behind the bill and show that it has substantial support, which I believe it does have.

What would the bill do? First, there would be a significant change to the fines. It would not be a minimum; we are not telling a judge that he has to give a minimum fine of x dollars. We are saying that the amount of the fine has to be increased. The fine for a summary conviction would be increased from \$2,000 to \$20,000. The fine for an indictment would increase from \$5,000 to \$50,000. Whether it is the summary or indictment increase, I would argue that the proposed fine is very reasonable. We are not telling a judge that he has to use that amount. We are giving a judge, with the co-operation of the Crown, the opportunity to use some discretion and to levy a fine that would likely be a little bit more appropriate.

When I talk about a “little bit”, I am talking about the fact that a \$2,000 fine is really not going to cut it for many of the alleged offences. It is not going to have the desired impact that a \$20,000 fine or a \$50,000 fine would have if a judge determined that it were an indictable offence. In a particular situation a judge might want to levy a fine of \$45,000 or a maximum of \$50,000.

• (1850)

When the government responds to this particular bill, it would be nice to hear what it feels about this aspect of the legislation. Does it support the need at the very least to increase the fines? I suspect that the government would be supportive of that.

The second thing that the legislation would change is very significant. The government really needs to understand why it is so critically important that we make this change. The essence of the change is that we are saying that the Chief Electoral Officer in the future would have the opportunity to take a stand and contest something that has taken place before the court.

Private Members' Business

As it works today, my understanding is that it has to be either a candidate or a resident of the constituency who does that, and that is very limiting. The primary limitation I am concerned about is the financial means of doing so.

Say for the sake of argument that everyone in the chamber agreed unanimously that a particular incident that occurred in riding X should not have taken place and that as a result those election results should be voided and another byelection called to clear the air.

If we have to rely on the local candidate or a voter or a constituent in that riding, there is a fairly significant financial impediment that would, in all likelihood, prevent the result from being contested, even if there were unanimous agreement within the House of Commons that something had taken place that justified some form of intervention.

Therefore, what would the legislation actually do? It would enable the Chief Electoral Officer, who is independent, the opportunity at the very least to bring it to the next level, not to make the decision and not to take a partisan approach. All it would do is to enable the Chief Electoral Officer to take that position and make that intervention. I would argue there is great value in that.

We could talk about the most recent election, but I am a bit reluctant to do that, seeing the member who is going to be speaking after me. He might want to comment and reflect on whether this is about the New Democratic Party or the Liberal Party. Equally, I suspect I could speak of my concerns with regard to the Conservative Party. I suggest that there might be a validity all the way around.

However, the bill is suggesting at the end of the day that the Chief Electoral Officer, whom I think Canadians as a whole have immense respect for and recognize his true independence, would be in an excellent position ultimately to determine whether or not there were a valid public interest in pursuing this, and that it should not be left to the economic means of a person residing in a constituency for us to protect what we all care deeply and passionately about, the democratic foundations of our great country.

• (1855)

It would be a tragic mistake if we collectively or individually took our democracy for granted. I challenge members to not take it for granted, to see the merits of the bill and allow it to go to committee where members on both sides, but more specifically individuals and stakeholders outside the House of Commons, would be able to participate in the debate on this very important bill. I ask all members to stand in their place to support it.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the sponsor of the bill who, I believe, does so with good intention and with a skilled hand as a legislator in this place.

The bill would amend the Canada Elections Act to increase the fines for serious election offences. It would provide that the Chief Electoral Officer could contest an election of a candidate under part 20 of the act.

I think everyone in this place can agree that it is our responsibility as parliamentarians to always look for ways to continue to ensure strong, free and fair elections in Canada. Our electoral system must have the trust and confidence of Canadians. Our Conservative government has a proud record of achievement when it comes to strengthening our democracy, a point which I will return to a few minutes later.

We certainly agree that people who commit election fraud and those who break the law should be held to account with tough penalties, and we certainly do not have a problem with tougher penalties. In fact, we welcome the agreement I think we have here in the House on fines and tougher penalties for serious election offences. That agreement is something I hope we will be able to come back to as this session of Parliament continues this fall.

We probably all agree more generally with some sort of strengthening of the enforcement mechanisms of the Canadian Elections Act as well. However, we believe that changes to the Canada Elections Act should be considered in a broader context than that presented in the bill. Piecemeal amendments such as these do not encompass the broader context of the act.

That context is illustrated by the fact that just earlier this year the procedure and House affairs committee produced its 15th report in response to the Chief Electoral Officer's recommendations following the 40th election. That report contained 50 recommendations to the act, and that was not even a comprehensive review of the act. It was simply a review of issues that came up during that particular election.

One of those 50 recommendations dealt with fines. The government is currently reviewing this recommendation and the report as a whole and will put forward a proposal in due course. Therefore, we will have that issue covered in the future and in a more comprehensive way than this bill can provide for. That is plain to see. This bill has two elements. The procedure committee report has 50, so we are talking about a vast difference in scale. That is the broader context at stake.

However, I will not leave it at that. There is a serious problem with the bill. The bill has only two main elements and one of them is, unfortunately, disqualifying in nature. The problem is that the bill would completely undermine the neutrality and impartiality of the Chief Electoral Officer. The bill must be defeated on these grounds alone, even if there were no others.

Right now, participants in an election are able to contest that election. That means any elector or candidate in the electoral district in question can contest it. The application must be accompanied by a security cost in the amount of \$1,000. By inserting the Chief Electoral Officer in the arena, we would be undermining his impartial role. The officer is an independent player who represents Parliament. He is not a participant in an election and must therefore act in a manner that is neutral and impartial to all parties and candidates.

Each actor in an election has his or her role. The officer supervises the conduct of elections, kind of like a referee in a hockey game. He does not pick up a stick and start paying. At least he should not.

Private Members' Business

All complaints alleging offences to the act are referred to the commissioner of Canada elections. The commissioner investigates and enforces the rules. When the commissioner believes that an offence has been committed, the commissioner may refer the matter to the director of public prosecutions who would decide whether or not the matter should be prosecuted.

• (1900)

While the administration and enforcement is left to others, the contestation of elections is left to the political actors, that is candidates and voters. Once again, the Chief Electoral Officer is kept above this fray.

The Chief Electoral Officer should not be an active player in making an election contested. Otherwise, he or she would be put in a conflicted position of potentially filing a complaint against himself or herself. He or she is, after all, the officiator and any bill that requires him or her to make complaints on how an election is officiated would effectively turn his or her own sword on his or her own person.

As such, no measures should be put in place that would risk giving rise to even the perception of any favouritism on the part of the Chief Electoral Officer. I think we can all agree that any favouritism or bias on the part of the Chief Electoral Officer would bring the officer and Elections Canada as a whole into disrepute. The power to contest elections would create just such a risk. The Chief Electoral Officer would have to pick cases to be brought to court. Invariably, those denied will complain of favouritism, having to bear the cost of litigation, and rightly so.

Furthermore, irregularities that may call an election result into question may have been the result of actions or omissions on the part of the Chief Electoral Officer or Elections Canada staff themselves. Imagine if actions or omissions of the Chief Electoral Officer became the subject of a potentially contested vote, and then imagine we had a legal regime that required that same electoral officer to file a complaint against himself or herself. The conflict is obvious and inescapable.

We saw this was the case in the contested election of Etobicoke Centre. In such a case, the Chief Electoral Officer would find himself or herself in a conflict of interest were he or she called upon to defend the actions of his or her staff while at the same time initiating the complaint against the process that he or she ran. So it is clear that the bill would put the Chief Electoral Officer in an intolerable position of conflict. As such, this proposal alone renders the bill unsupportable by the government. Thankfully, we are taking other actions and we hope to co-operate with the hon. member for Beauséjour and the opposition in order to see them to a successful conclusion.

Last night, Bill C-21, the political loans accountability act, passed at second reading in the House. The bill would fix the current rules for political loans, which have been made a mockery of by the opposition parties. Six of the nine NDP contestants in the recent leadership contest failed to meet their filing deadlines for disclosure. They claimed software glitches or having to attend a conference. They had six full months to get their books in order but they could not meet a generous reporting deadline.

The Liberal Party's record is worse. Four Liberal candidates from the 2006 Liberal leadership race, six years ago, have still not paid off their debts despite very generous extensions to the deadline. We are moving to tackle this problem and these abuses through the political loans accountability act.

Finally, we are moving forward with Bill C-377, which would require disclosure of union finances, this being extremely important after the recent discovery that the unions gave \$340,000 in illegal money to the NDP.

I encourage the opposition parties to work with us to expand accountability and strengthen the democracy that we all enjoy.

• (1905)

[*Translation*]

Mr. François Choquette (Drummond, NDP): Mr. Speaker, some of the things I heard from the hon. member who just spoke are truly unbelievable. It is rather impressive.

I rise today to support second reading of Bill C-424, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act, from the Liberal member for Beauséjour. This bill reflects many values that are dear to the NDP and also to Canadians, such as democracy, integrity and ethics. Furthermore, it reinforces our commitment to a transparent and ethical democracy and electoral process.

More specifically, Bill C-424 would increase the financial penalties for certain offences under the Elections Act. In addition, the Chief Electoral Officer would have greater latitude.

I will summarize the bill. Bill C-424 amends the Canada Elections Act to significantly increase—tenfold—the fines for certain offences under the act. The fines will go from \$2,000 to \$20,000 in the case of a summary conviction—a criminal offence that is less serious than an indictable offence—and from \$5,000 to \$50,000 in the case of a conviction on indictment.

The offences targeted by paragraphs 500(5)(a) and 500(5)(b) include delaying or obstructing the electoral process; offering or accepting bribes; compelling a voter to vote or refrain from voting for a particular candidate—for example, the whole scandal involving fraudulent calls or robocalls, in which people were asked not to vote, would fit into that category—acting as an election officer without being one; wilfully making a false statement; exceeding or circumventing advertising expenses limits; disclosing for whom the elector voted; intentionally counting the advance poll ballots prematurely; wilfully failing to declare a candidate elected; and knowingly conducting election advertising using a government means of transmission.

These offences apply to individuals, voters, election officers—including returning officers—polling firms, candidates, registered associations, party leaders and political parties in general.

The offences targeted by stiffer penalties relate to inappropriate behaviour that could seriously weaken the legitimacy of Canada's democratic process.

Private Members' Business

We are really concerned about this bill, because these are all actions that prevent people from recognizing the ethical side of the political profession. It is important that Canadians regain confidence in politics, because right now the public is really discouraged. In Drummond and in Drummondville people often tell me that politicians are all the same and that they are all corrupt at some point. We are trying to improve politicians' image. In order to do so, we need legislation with teeth. Increasing the fines is a good first step to improve the reputation of politicians and politics and to help people regain confidence in politics, so that they will get involved and have confidence in us as politicians.

We are all here because we want to serve our constituents and because we want what is good for our country. That is what the public should see in us, instead of perceiving us as people who abuse the system. That is why it is important to restore ethics. This bill is a good first step in promoting ethics in the context of the Canada Elections Act.

Regarding the monetary penalties for certain violations of the Canada Elections Act, the Chief Electoral Officer himself has questioned some of the disproportionately small penalties. We saw this earlier with fines of \$2,000 and \$5,000, which is ridiculous. This is not enough to deter malicious people from breaking the law. Much harsher penalties are needed, and multiplying them by 10 is a good start and a good idea. We must support this.

• (1910)

For instance, falsely representing Elections Canada using mechanisms like the infamous robocalls, or fraudulent phone calls, is punishable by a fine of only between \$2,000 and \$5,000. That is ridiculous. This problem has not yet been resolved in the House of Commons. We must find the guilty parties and ensure that this does not happen again in future elections. Results in some ridings were probably affected by this illegal practice.

The existing fines are not enough to discourage malicious people from doing this terrible deed—preventing people from voting by sending them to the wrong polling station. The Chief Electoral Officer shares our opinion and asked the government to do something. That is what my colleague from Beauséjour has done.

In a scientific article, a law graduate from the Université de Montréal reiterated the remarks of the Chief Electoral Officer:

The current penalties are not tailored to the offences. For example, certain aspects of the law may result in criminal prosecution when administrative penalties would be more effective and more quickly implemented.

She continues by saying that “the amount of the current administrative penalties should be reviewed.” She then again quotes the Chief Electoral Officer and says, “...serious offences carry disproportionately light penalties, including maximum fines that are very low—usually \$2,000 or \$5,000.”

It is appalling that people are committing such serious acts. Unfortunately, we still have not gotten to the bottom of this. We are having difficulty getting the Conservatives' support, which would allow us to get answers about Mr. Poutine and the absolutely ridiculous story of the fraudulent calls. We are not finished with this yet. Unfortunately, the Conservatives are not co-operating enough to resolve this problem, restore politicians' credibility and ensure that

all members of the House, who serve the people in their ridings, act in an ethical manner.

Canadians want more transparency and they want to be able to once again have confidence in our democratic institutions. All elected members of the House of Commons must listen to Canadians. We must do everything we can to restore their confidence in our democratic institutions. That is why this act must be reviewed as quickly as possible.

In order to be thorough, Bill C-424, which was introduced by the hon. member for Beauséjour, deserves to be examined in more detail in committee. The bill is a good starting point, but we must continue to improve it. That is why it is absolutely necessary that it be examined in committee. The NDP supports sending this bill to committee. I hope that the Conservatives will also support it but, unfortunately, I doubt they will.

We look forward to the committee's findings so that we can analyze the direction that my Liberal colleague's bill will take. The Chief Electoral Officer must continue to play an important role in preserving the integrity of the electoral process. It is a matter of public interest. The many alleged offences during the last election clearly show that this is having a negative impact on Canada's democracy. That is why we must immediately take steps to improve the Canada Elections Act. This bill is a good start.

• (1915)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue has only eight minutes.

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to Bill C-424, An Act to amend the Canada Elections Act (contestation of election and punishment). The purpose of this bill, introduced by the hon. member for Beauséjour, is to change the rules for contesting an election and the fines in cases of electoral fraud.

Since becoming a member of Parliament, I have seen many debates and many issues raised in this House about the last election. It is high time that we took a more serious look at addressing the rules for contesting an election.

The proposed changes in this bill will significantly increase the fines for certain offences under the Canada Elections Act. The fine will increase from \$2,000 to \$20,000 on summary conviction for a contested election, and from \$5,000 to \$50,000 on conviction on indictment.

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It is perfectly appropriate to wonder what type of offence this might cover. It covers delaying or obstructing the electoral process; offering or accepting a bribe; inciting or compelling a person to vote or refrain from voting for a particular candidate by using duress, intimidation, pretence or contrivance; and exceeding or circumventing election advertising expense limits. These are examples of offences that can be punishable under the legislation. These offences might involve candidates, party leaders or the political parties in general.

Another major change this bill proposes is that it will give the Chief Electoral Officer the power to contest an election. Currently, only a candidate for election or a constituent in a particular riding is authorized to contest the results of an election.

This bill gives the Chief Electoral Officer the power to investigate an election or alleged fraud during an election if he believes it is necessary. It is important to understand that the Chief Electoral Officer is often one of the only people who has the complete picture of what happened in a riding. It is unlikely that an individual would file a complaint about the election when he really is not aware, for example, that a thousand people had the same experience. It would be difficult for him to contest the election if he was not aware of all the other problem cases that arose during the same election.

Therefore, I believe that it makes sense to allow investigations to be carried out. Our democratic system is truly precious, and authorizing more frequent investigations of election fraud is a good thing. It is also important to remember that these investigations will take place if there are true concerns. The Chief Electoral Office will only launch an investigation if he has good cause and is truly convinced that there is a problem. Giving him the authority to conduct investigations does not mean that there will be an unlimited number of them. It will simply make it possible to hold investigations in specific situations.

It is also important to remember the context in which the bill was introduced. In recent years, there have been allegations of fraud, intimidation and fraudulent calls during the last federal election. There has been talk of bribes, falsification of voter lists and false information given out in order to prevent voters from voting. We need only think of Pierre Poutine and his 7,000 electronic calls on the day of the election. There were thousands of complaints from all over Canada during the last federal election.

When he appeared before the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in March, the Chief Electoral Officer said:

● (1920)

In that context, concerns have also been raised regarding the administration of the vote in certain electoral districts. This includes allegations of unusual numbers of polling day registrations, people registering improperly and voting by non-citizens. These are very serious matters that strike at the integrity of our democratic process. If they are not addressed and responded to, they risk undermining an essential ingredient of a healthy democracy—namely, the trust that electors have in the electoral process.

He is right. Election fraud jeopardizes our democratic system and the integrity of our democracy.

At the time, nearly 40,000 people had contacted the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer to express their concerns about this scandal. He was the only one who knew about the existence of all the other

people. A member of the public cannot know that 39,999 other people called the Chief Electoral Officer to complain. This issue is extremely important and must be taken seriously. We cannot allow our democracy to be jeopardized by partisan games.

I am not sure yet if this bill is the best way to prevent these kinds of scandalous practices in the future, or at least to dispel the doubt people have about the democratic process. I think we must examine it more carefully in committee. That is a start. That will enable us to move forward. It must be studied in committee so that we can make any adjustments that are needed. This is our democracy, our democratic system. The country we represent will reap the benefits.

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

EMERGENCY DEBATE

[English]

FOOD SAFETY

The Deputy Speaker: The House will now proceed to the consideration of a motion to adjourn the House for the purpose of discussing a specific and important matter requiring urgent consideration, namely food safety.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.) moved:

That this House do now adjourn.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Toronto Centre.

For the second time in four years, we are faced with a major breach in food safety in Canada. The first time, we said never again, but one month ago, we were reminded that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency still does not have the resources it requires, and now, once again, people are sick.

On September 16, 2012, the CFIA issued a recall of just over 20 different meat products, originating at the XL Foods facility in Brooks, Alberta, that were possibly contaminated with E.coli 0157, the same virus that killed seven and poisoned thousands of others at Walkerton, Ontario in 2000. It is a pathogen that when consumed can cause vomiting and bloody diarrhea in most but can go on to attack the kidneys and other organs in vulnerable Canadians, such as seniors and children.

This is a significant date, because the recall occurred two weeks after E.coli contamination was found by American inspectors in a shipment of beef destined for the United States.

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On September 3, the Americans positively diagnosed E. coli in an XL Foods shipment after stopping the shipment at the border. On September 4, American inspectors notified Canadian officials that our meat was contaminated, and they held subsequent shipments. On September 13, having found two more contaminated shipments 10 days after their initial finding, the United States Food Safety Inspection Service delisted XL's Brooks, Alberta facility, preventing it from exporting any further meat to the United States.

This brings us to September 16, 13 days after the Americans first found E.coli in a shipment of beef from XL. Our inspection agency's first action to recall tainted meat and protect Canadians from a potentially fatal pathogen took two weeks, which many of the 23 Canadians in Alberta and Saskatchewan who are now suffering would argue was two weeks too long. Despite the rapidly expanding recall, it still took 10 days after the recall to finally shut down the XL Foods Brooks facility for clear violations of the standards regulating sanitation, health and safety.

Now, one month on from the Americans' first finding, we are still looking for answers. Like the recall, which has grown to more than 1.5 million pounds of meat across 1,500 different products, day after day we only have more questions for a government that appears more interested in managing its public relations risk than in working on the real damage being created by a critical break in our food safety system. When was the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food made aware that XL Foods shipped meat contaminated with E.coli to the United States? When was he first aware that the XL Foods facility was no longer meeting minimum sanitation requirements? Why did he argue last week that there was no risk of contaminated product reaching store shelves, when clearly, a recall of 1.5 million pounds of meat, the largest in our history, is not merely a preventive matter?

Conservatives would have us believe that \$56.1 million in cuts in the spring budget did not have an impact on the resources available to inspectors or that the hundreds of jobs they cut, including 90 biologists and 140 veterinarians, did not have a negative impact on the speed and efficiency of our front-line food safety workers.

Conservatives would have us believe that regardless of the job they did gutting essential resources this year, they have put enough in over the past five years that it should not matter. Clearly, it does. They answer our calls for more inspectors and more financial stability with derision but refuse to answer these questions: If the resources they gave the CFIA were enough, why are 23 Canadians suffering from food-borne illness related to E.coli? Why has the FSIS shut their borders to meat from XL Foods' Brooks facility? How did the facility get so far behind in meeting whatever food safety standards exist?

In 2008, 23 Canadians died, and hundreds more were sick, after consuming listeria-tainted meat in a situation that is eerily beginning to resemble our current state. In her report stemming from an investigation of what went wrong, Sheila Weatherill found a number of key factors that led to a catastrophic breakdown in inspection and prevention. Among those she pointed out was a major disconnect between senior management of both the industry and the CFIA in their approach to food safety, especially as it pertained to monitoring trends that would assist in identifying recurring bacteria presence.

Notably, as recently as last week, Dr. Richard Arseneault, director of meat inspection at the CFIA, said, "We need to do a better job of managing this data and finding these trends ahead of time...as opposed to having to respond to a crisis like this", all this so that inspectors might connect the dots.

The second key factor noted by Ms. Weatherill was our state of readiness, or the lack thereof. She was concerned about insufficient training for inspectors, in particular.

• (1925)

Yesterday, before the Senate committee on agriculture, Bob Kingston, president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada's Agriculture Union, expressed his concern that only a small number of inspectors at XL Foods are properly trained to manage the compliance verification system, because there are not enough resources or trained inspectors to cover the time and material for bringing all inspectors up to speed.

Ms. Weatherill was concerned that one of the truly fatal flaws during the listeria outbreak was a lack of a sense of urgency at its outset. Concerns about when to notify the public in 2008 were mirrored this month when it took two weeks to notify the Canadian public that there was a threat to their food supply. Ms. Weatherill said: "Until the system is remedied, events like those of the summer of 2008 remain a real risk".

Despite that being three years ago, here we go again, and her initial concerns still ring true.

Conservatives will tell us that they have fulfilled all the recommendations of the Weatherill report. However, just this year, they removed funding specific to listeria, and they have yet to complete a comprehensive third-party audit of all CFIA resources, including staffing, which she requested as her seventh recommendation.

Allow me to quote Ms. Weatherill further:

Due to the lack of detailed information and differing views heard, we were unable to determine the current level of resources as well as the resources needed to conduct the CVS activities effectively. For the same reason, we were also unable to come to a conclusion concerning the adequacy of the program design implementation plan, training and supervision of inspectors, as well as oversight and performance monitoring.

Accordingly, she recommended:

To accurately determine the demand on its inspection resources and the number of required inspectors, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency should retain third-party experts to conduct a resource audit. The experts should also recommend required changes and implementation strategies. The audit should include analysis as to how many plants an inspector should be responsible for and the appropriateness of rotation of inspectors.

To this day, that has yet to be done.

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Conservatives will tell us that they acted on each recommendation. However, they cannot tell us how many inspectors they have, what their roles and responsibilities are, or where they are located. In fact, the only study they engaged in was a superficial review of resources available to the compliance verification system.

They will also accuse us of holding up their newest food safety legislation, which dismantles the various inspection acts, including the Meat Inspection Act, by removing specializations and making inspectors jacks of all trades but masters of none. However, they will not say that we support modernizing our food system, so long as it includes the necessary resources.

Furthermore, contrary to statements by their president earlier today claiming that the CFIA does not currently have the power to compel XL Foods to present proper documentation proving compliance, the Meat Inspection Act provides that:

[A]n inspector may...require any person to produce for inspection, or for the purpose of obtaining copies or extracts, any book, shipping bill, bill of lading or other document or record that the inspector believes on reasonable grounds contains any information relevant to the administration or enforcement of this Act or the regulations.

Moreover, the act compels the operator of the plant not only to comply but to facilitate the process. Hiding behind the imaginary facade of new, enhanced powers should not let anyone off the hook for this blatant failure to act.

The danger posed by Conservative inaction on the food safety file extends beyond the health and safety of Canadians. It is a threat to our ranchers, who have just started to recover from the BSE ordeal.

Borders across the world have finally reopened to our beef trade. Still, the government is currently attempting to negotiate away the very program that caught our contaminated meat at the border.

We have some of the finest inspectors in the world, but they are hamstrung by a lack of resources, leaving them incapable of performing the necessary functions of their jobs. Clearly, we have seen that the industry, while it can work in partnership, can no longer be left alone to police itself.

In terms of immediate action, will the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food finally consent to a comprehensive third-party audit of the resources necessary to operate the CFIA? Will the government finally agree to give our food inspection agency the powers and resources it needs to keep Canadians safe?

• (1930)

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Guelph. He sits on the agriculture committee with me and was here in the last Parliament with me as well. Although he did not sit on the listeriosis subcommittee with me, I did sit on that committee with the other member from his caucus, the member for Malpeque.

To state the obvious, it is déjà vu all over again. He quite correctly pointed out what happened in that particular outbreak, when 22 people died of listeriosis, and how that was addressed.

I wonder if my colleague could speak about the 170 inspectors out of the 700 and some-odd the government says it has actually put in place. We know, of course, that they are not actually front-line inspectors. The government has a catch-all phrase for what they call

them as a category. Indeed, only 170 inspectors are in front-line meat inspection, but not in facilities like XL. They are actually in the ready-to-eat meat program.

I wonder if my colleague could express his concerns about why there were no new inspectors put into XL?

• (1935)

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for that question. It is a pleasure to serve with him on the committee.

The facade the government creates is enormous. It keeps talking about all the inspectors it has hired, as my friend has noted. It seems to suggest that these inspectors have been put into the system for the purpose of dealing with food safety at meat processing plants. I found out today that 200 inspectors who were added were added to the invasive alien species program, which is designed to keep harmful organisms out of Canada. They have nothing to do with meat inspection whatsoever.

I have another concern with respect to the Conservatives' continued comments that there are 46 inspectors at this particular Lakeside plant. When I was at that plant several years ago, there were about 3,000 head processed a day. There are now over 4,000 head processed a day. That is a one-third increase. They have not increased the number of inspectors by the same proportion. My concern is that they are cutting corners, and that cutting of corners is what has led to this outbreak.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a press release here from the NFU, which states: "Cattle farmers are already feeling the effect of the closure, as prices for fat steers and cull cows have already dropped by 20% and 30% respectively".

Both the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Health are missing in action. They are failing to show control of the problem and to give assurance of safe meat in the country. I am worried that it is almost like a run on the banks during a financial problem.

There are very good meat operations out there. The cattle producers produce good quality meat.

What should be done in that regard to give assurance to consumers and help the farm community out as well?

Mr. Frank Valeriote: Mr. Speaker, the member is quite right. There is good meat out there. A lot of ranchers are quite concerned about the impression that has been left by the government and its failure to protect our food supply. I met with some of those ranchers and with other processors today.

We need to reassure Canadians that there is a way to eat safely, notwithstanding the government's failures. I am not a cook or a chef, but I will say that they need to cook their meat to 70° C or 170° F, which will actually kill the E. coli.

As quickly as borders were opened, they can be slapped shut instantly by the failures that have been demonstrated by the government. The slapping shut of our borders is our deepest concern on behalf of the ranchers of our country.

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Guelph for having moved this motion. I know it was an idea that was shared by the member for Welland. It does give the House a chance to debate a subject of great importance to Canadians.

● (1940)

[Translation]

I want to make a comment in that regard. This is a real concern for consumers. People want to know that their health will never be in danger because the government did not do its job. That is the first thing that needs to be said.

This matter does not affect only consumers, but also Canada's reputation. We live in a world where products like meat are exported to the United States, Europe and Asia. For quite some time now, Canadians have been working hard to maintain a positive reputation around the globe.

This issue also affects the producers of this meat, including those in Alberta and the west, and across Canada. It is a nationwide industry. We believe it is a situation that requires a more tangible and direct response from the government. It is not enough for the government to say that it has appointed 700 inspectors. Besides, 700 were not appointed, but rather 170. The government can appoint 10,000 inspectors, but if the result is the same, then we have a problem.

The government can say it took action, but frankly, it moved too slowly. The American authorities acted a lot faster, for they began refusing products from that plant on September 13. It was not until September 16 that the Canadian government insisted on recalling products that had been sent all over the place. The plant was not closed until last week. The government did not respond appropriately to protect not only Canadian consumers, but also our reputation around the world.

[English]

Canadians have to understand that operations like the one in Brooks, Alberta are huge operations. We are looking at thousands of cattle being processed every day. We are looking at hundreds of millions of pounds of meat being dealt with across the country on an annual basis. We are looking at fewer and fewer large slaughterhouses being available for farmers. We are looking at a system that requires and insists that there be an absolutely seamless process of inspection and of assurance that in every step of the way steps are being taken to protect the consumer, the rancher, the producer and those who buy our product. Those who buy our product are not only in Canada, they are around the world.

Every minister of agriculture knows that Canada's reputation is only as strong as our ability to ensure the health and safety of every

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consumer of this product each and every day. That is why I cannot understand some of the responses we have heard from the government. I cannot understand the performance I saw on television by the Minister of Agriculture. He spoke for four and a half minutes, left the stage and said that he was sorry he had to go. Then as soon as the president of the CFIA stood to speak, the government spokesperson said that the press conference was over.

That is cowardice. How else could we describe a minister who cannot defend himself in the House of Commons, cannot defend the actions of the CFIA in the House of Commons and he goes to Alberta for a photo op and he cannot even defend himself at the photo op? Something has gone clearly wrong.

Yes, we have other examples. We had the listeriosis crisis, which affected the country four years ago. By contrast with what we have seen from XL, Maple Leaf Foods was out there every day, defending itself, explaining, trying to get people to understand the importance because it understood from the get-go that this was about reputation as much as it was about health.

It affects everything including the credibility of the system. Where has XL been? We do not hear from the people at XL. They are not there. When people call the company, they get an answering machine.

This is affecting hundreds of thousands of consumers, and the company says that its responsibility is to disappear. Companies can disappear, but we have seen a disappearing act that matches Houdini by the Minister of Agriculture.

That is something which requires a real response from the government today. Canadians expect better and expect answers. They expect more than a Prime Minister who says that it is a great system and the government has added all the inspectors.

I am sure the minister and the parliamentary secretary will have exactly the same rote responses, that the first priority they have is the protection of consumers. If it is the first priority, why are the consumers the last to know? If the Americans could close the border on September 13, why could we not have done the same thing on the same day?

The government takes great pride in the fact that it is now signing this seamless border agreement with the Americans. What is going to happen to that as a result of this incident? What is going to happen to that when the Americans wake up and realize that the standards we are putting in place are not as strong as we claim they are and are not as good and seamless as we claim they are?

The consumer has to be told much earlier. The public has to know how and why this happened. The government has to come clean with the Canadian public, not giving us press release after press release, not holding photo ops after photo ops. There has to be an understanding that this has happened because something went wrong, not because something went right. This has happened because something was wrong for a long period of time, and consumers were left vulnerable for too long.

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The enthusiasm on that side for privatization and deregulation will not deal with this problem. This is a problem which requires robust government capacity, a robust capacity to protect the public interest and a robust capacity to protect the public health.

Yes, the companies have to be involved. Yes, there will never be enough inspectors to cover every situation, every moment. Companies have to be engaged in helping us to deal with this question.

However, the people who are working for the companies need to have the independence and the power to do their jobs. They need to have the training to do their jobs. We have to ensure that this system is clearly and honestly in place.

This is why we believe that in addition to the answers we have been asking for over the last several days, there clearly needs to be a report, very quickly, by the Auditor General of Canada, some independent way of assessing the government statements that all of the recommendations of the Weatherill report have been carried and a real assessment as to how our CFIA compares with inspection in the U.S. and in Europe. We cannot simply be among the best; we can be the best country.

The food industry is an absolutely fundamental industry to our country. I do not think many Canadians understand that for all the publicity about other manufacturing industries, the food industry is at the heart of manufacturing. It is at the heart of prosperity in the country. It connects agriculture and the farmer, the small and the large producers with some of the largest companies in the world. It gives Canada its global reach.

That global reach is only as good as our local reputation. It is only as good as the actions that we in fact take and the assurance that we are as good as our word and that we are up to the job. Right now, that bunch is not up to the job. That is why we have had to call for this emergency debate.

● (1945)

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened intently to the interim leader of the Liberal Party's comments. The one thing that was missing through it all was he never once mentioned how this was devastating cattle producers across the country. He went on and on about fear-mongering and scaring consumers to think that we do not have a good food safety system.

We do have a good food safety system. If the member understood the situation we are dealing with right now in Brooks, if he understood the situation with XL Foods, he would know that there is only one player in this whole situation that we need to blame and that really needs to be held to account, and that is XL itself.

There are 46 food inspectors in that plant, 46 inspectors doing the research and ensuring that XL was trying to find problems going right back to September 4. They found the problem. They asked for correctional measures to be taken.

We are not hearing anything about that aspect. That side wants to play political games. Those members want to blame the government and CFIA, but they never once say that we should look at the culprit in all of this, the company—

● (1950)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Toronto Centre.

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, if he cares to look at the blues and my speech, one of the first things I said in French and in English was that this was a problem which affected everybody. I said it affected producers and ranchers. I will say it again because I do not think the member listened to what I said. This is a devastating issue for everyone involved in the food industry in our country and that includes ranchers and producers across the country. We understand that.

He also says that he has reached the conclusion that the company is uniquely responsible for what happened. The company obviously bears a responsibility. We are not a court here. We are not going to determine which is liable. The only people we can ask questions of are the people who are here and are answering questions.

If the member honestly thinks that any of us take particular joy in the fact that this issue is now effecting the largest meat recall in the history of the country, then he is sadly mistaken. I hope he will listen to what is being said and understand that perhaps we have a lot more in common than he realizes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his remarks about this major crisis shaking Canada and Quebec.

I would like to put the crisis into perhaps a broader context, as part of the accomplishments of, or the mess made by, the Conservative government.

When we were told that \$4 billion was going to be cut from the public service and that 19,000 people were going to be laid off, but that it was not going to affect services to the public, that it was going to have no effect and that we were going to save \$4 billion in administrative and photocopying costs, they treated us like fools, they laughed right in our faces. Today, we see the effect: we have no means of ensuring public safety and no means of providing real services directly to the public.

I would like to hear how the distinguished member feels about the Conservatives blindly cutting services to Canadians and compromising their safety.

Hon. Bob Rae: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is perfectly right. Naturally the cuts have had an effect. That is bound to happen. There is a good study that I would like to recommend to him. He should read the report by Justice O'Connor on the events that took place in Walkerton. It is a very important report, and a long one, in two volumes.

In his report, Justice O'Connor shows that there is a link between budget cuts and problems with regulations. Opposite us, we have the same group that was responsible for the cuts in Ontario between 1990 and 2000, and we are in the same situation. Naturally, we will need an inquiry to tell us the extent to which the lack of regulations and the lack of human resources available to deal with the problem are responsible for it. That is what remains to be done.

The government is now concealing the effect of the cuts. It is ready to say that cuts were made, but the Parliamentary Budget Officer tells us that he does not know exactly where the problems are.

[English]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to address the House on the ongoing matter of the beef recall that has been much in the news today. I welcome the opportunity to talk about this issue and to clarify the situation. Let me reiterate that the health and safety of Canadians, particularly when it comes to food safety, is the top priority for this government.

Please allow me to list some of the facts for the record. First, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency acted to contain contaminated products beginning on September 4 and it has been acting ever since. Second, the XL plant will not be allowed to reopen until the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has certified that it is safe. Third, our Conservative government has hired over 700 additional net new inspectors since 2006, including 170 meat inspectors and, I might add, with no help from the opposition, which has voted against this and other valuable initiatives to fortify our food safety system.

Fourth, our government has implemented all 57 recommendations from the Weatherill report. Fifth, we have increased CFIA's budget by \$156 million, which is a 20% increase and once again, the opposition voted against this. Sixth, we have tabled legislation in the other place, Bill S-11, known as the safe food for Canadians act, to strengthen the authorities under which CFIA acts.

The bill will be coming to the House for debate and voting. If the opposition believes that the powers of the agency are not sufficient, then it should support our government's legislation to make sure that the CFIA has greater authorities. The opposition needs to change the way that it has been voting on food safety issues.

Now that we know the basic facts, let me put it into context. As many are already well aware, XL Foods, which operates an Alberta-based meat processing facility, is implicated in a very substantial recall of beef products. The recall is a result of E. coli 0157:H7 having been found present in products that originate from this facility.

E. coli cases in Canada have dropped 50% since 2006. There is a great deal of information about how to avoid food-borne illness. In the case of E. coli, washing hands, keeping food preparation services clean and cooking food to proper temperature is usually all that is ever needed to avoid getting sick. The fact that this particular producer provides a large amount of beef product to further processors and retailers across Canada and for export to the United States adds to the complexity of this particular situation.

That being said, despite the efforts of the CFIA to provide disclosure and transparency about the events surrounding this issue, there persists a perception, a narrative, if one will, that is at odds with the facts. Last Friday, CFIA experts in food safety and public health held a press conference where they delivered detailed information and informative statements and took many questions from the media. All questions were fully answered.

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Furthermore, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's website contains detailed information about what happened, where and when. The full chronology is there for all to see. People will also see information such as what the issue is, when it was first discovered, likely factors and actions taken. All of that is available to the media and to the general public.

I appreciate that much of the information being delivered leans to the technical side in terms of detail, so I will try to bring some clarity to the issue. For the record, allow me to share some of the misconceptions that still persist and must be set straight. There is the idea that American inspectors discovered the problem, while the CFIA did not, and that Canada was alerted to the problem solely due to American inspection efforts. This is not true. It was found in Calgary by the CFIA and the CFIA and Americans were communicating with each other about their test results on the same day.

It has been said that cuts to CFIA's inspection capacity, specifically the number of inspectors, has contributed to the XL problem and that this food safety issue is a direct result of the agency being under-resourced in this facility. This is false. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, our government has hired more than 700 net new inspectors since 2006, and we have consistently increased funding for food safety multiple times since 2006, including by \$52 million in our last budget alone.

It has been alluded to that our government is shying away from making any positive link between E. coli and beef and certain people who have become sick with E. coli. There has been no such evasion. Five cases have been connected by the Alberta public health authority. As a government, we feel for these people and understand how difficult this situation is.

● (1955)

Going back to the beginning when problems were first discovered, it needs to be understood that the CFIA discovered E. coli in a beef product on September 4. This product, discovered in one establishment, had originated from the XL Foods establishment in Alberta. On that very same day, the CFIA was informed that inspectors working for the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, or the FSIS, had discovered E. coli in a sample of beef trimmings that had originated from the same XL Foods plant in Alberta.

The CFIA was alerted by the FSIS about the discovery on September 4 and the meat products were destroyed. The CFIA, through a trace out investigation, was able to determine that the meat products found to be positive in the U.S. were not distributed anywhere in Canada. The CFIA immediately launched an investigation into the causes of the problem on September 4. There was no delay.

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Canadian and American inspectors had discovered the problem in parallel and that information was shared. The source of Canada's information was our own inspection service turning up positive samples for *E. coli* in Alberta and the American find served to confirm it. This information can be verified simply by looking at the statements made on both the CFIA and FSIS websites. The idea that had the Americans not found a positive sample, our own inspection service would have missed the *E. coli* is false, as the problem was uncovered by the CFIA through routine testing.

Throughout the course of the CFIA investigation, inspectors stepped up their oversight of operations within the plant. By September 18, the CFIA determined that there was no single cause that it could link to *E. coli*-positive meat at the plant. However, there were a number of issues uncovered having to do with some protocols not being strictly followed. These are the sorts of issues that the CFIA discovers from time to time.

XL Foods was informed of these deficiencies and was ordered to correct them before a firm deadline. Based on the in-depth investigation conducted by the CFIA from September 4 through to September 16, it was decided health hazard alerts should be issued to the public. During that time period there was not a single day that the CFIA was not actively investigating the issue on an urgent basis.

By September 16, XL Foods had begun recalling beef trimmings from three days of production from its clients. We must understand that beef trimmings coming out of one facility can go out to many different clients who further process these trimmings into other food products. Some of it might end up as ground beef. Some of it might be turned into fresh or frozen hamburger patties. Some of it could end up in sausages, frozen lasagna, meatballs or soup, and all under different brand names. The food supply system in this particular case is vast.

What we have is the CFIA actively tracing products into the supply chain based on a limited number of specific production dates. The agency tracked down the various companies, food processors, destinations and further processing points that the meat could have gone out to as quickly as possible and then food recalls for those food products were announced. As soon as a product was discovered to have had its origins in a high-risk run of production, it was recalled. As a result, what looked like recall after recall was really just one recall, with the group of affected products expanding as the different companies, processors, product lines and products were identified.

This is the tracing out process. It can take some time to go through various company records in multiple locations with information presented in vastly different formats. When a food recall gets under way the CFIA works literally around the clock to get the products off the shelf as fast and as comprehensively as it can. In fact it is considered to be the best in the world at food recalls.

Through further investigation it was decided, based on data that the CFIA collected, that production runs from two other days showed a higher than usual risk for *E. coli* and so products originating from these batches of trim were also added to the recall list. On September 27, the establishment's licence was suspended. The suspension resulted from the company being unable to fully implement the corrective actions requested by the CFIA. The

suspension followed established agency protocol for when a food producer is unable or unwilling to comply with corrective actions requested by the agency.

Let me be clear. The XL plant will not reopen until the CFIA has certified that it is safe.

● (2000)

The CFIA acted swiftly to address the problem once it was discovered. It was discovered by CFIA inspectors during routine testing. Although it looked like a staggered recall to outsiders because the recall got wider and wider as more information on products became available, it really was a single recall of products produced on five production dates at the facility.

I will now address the budget issue. As we are all aware, our government, in its efforts to reduce the deficit, asked officials to make proposals that could find savings for budget 2012. Did budget 2012 expose Canadians to more food safety risk? Absolutely not, and for the opposition to say otherwise is just wrong. In budget 2012, as I mentioned earlier in my comments, we put forward more than an additional \$50 million for food safety. That is what is in budget 2012. That is in addition to \$100 million that was in budget 2011. Our government remains committed to ensuring that the food Canadians and their families eat is safe.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has not made any changes that would in any way risk the health and safety of Canadians. Contrary to what some have asserted, we have made significant investments in food safety. Recognizing the challenges and opportunities of the current environment, our government's budget last year committed over \$100 million over five years for the CFIA to modernize its food inspection system. This included new resources on inspection delivery, training for inspection staff, scientific capacity on food laboratories, and information management and technology. Once again, the opposition voted against all of this.

In the case of this particular XL Foods facility, CFIA inspection staffing levels have actually gone up over the last six years, not down. There are 40 inspectors and six veterinarians assigned full time to the XL facility. That is six more inspectors and two more veterinarians than were assigned there in 2006. In this case in particular, and as a general rule across all of the agency's inspection services, there has been no cut in food safety service delivery. Budget 2012 is not relevant to this food recall and, as I mentioned, there have been additional resources allocated to CFIA through budget 2012.

I will now deal with the issue of illness. The agency has been very transparent about providing to the public all of the information it has around links to recalled food and human illness. At the press conference last Friday, a knowledgeable spokesman from the Public Health Agency of Canada addressed this issue. The PHAC website is being continually updated when information about cases of food-borne illnesses linked to the XL Food recalls becomes known. Further tests are required and it must be firmly established that people who actually ate products originating from this XL facility have been affected. This requires interviews about what people consumed in the recent past and the testing of any food that they may still have in their homes to establish a clear link. This work is done collaboratively by provincial public health agencies, the CFIA and the PHAC. It is a high scientific and evidentiary standard that must be adhered to. Anything less would be speculation and our government is not in the business of speculating on the health of Canadians. We need accurate information to make informed decisions.

We have a strong food safety regime here in Canada and we aim to make it even better with the proposed safe food for Canadians act. This government is committed to making these instances even rarer and to having a robust and efficient recall system when situations like this occur.

● (2005)

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I just heard the member say that the government is not in the business of speculating on the health of Canadians. I was just at an event at a very significant hotel here in Ottawa tonight and it was serving beef. I guess if the Minister of Agriculture were there and were asked whether it was inspected or not, he would say, "I don't know and I don't care".

Is that the standard by which the government determines how the health of Canadians is looked after by food inspection?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, I will explain for this member that our government takes the health and safety of Canadians very seriously, particularly when it comes to food safety. It is a top priority for our government. He is asking what standards we have brought to bear. In my comments I mentioned specific things that we have done in the House where we sought opposition support for increasing the number of food inspectors for the CFIA, for increasing funding for the CFIA and now we have a bill at the Senate to give the CFIA more authority to act.

Up to this point, the opposition members, particularly the New Democrats, have voted against all of these measures. Bill S-11 is not in this place yet but they have already stated their intention to oppose it. That is shameful and they need to answer to Canadians for that.

● (2010)

Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the parliamentary secretary will know that the one date he left out of his chronology was September 13, the day the American border was closed to XL products. I cannot understand why, given his interest in U.S.-Canada trade, he would have omitted that particular date. Then he mentioned that on September 16 the recalls started when the CFIA must have realized that the contamination spread beyond the product that was contained in the first issue of September 3 and 4.

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Why was there a delay of 72 hours? Would the parliamentary secretary not admit that after September 16 the CFIA in fact broadened its concerns to go beyond what was taking place on the line on August 24, to look at what was taking place in the days after that, so that in fact the problem was one that was growing larger and more serious as the CFIA continued its investigation?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, to respond to the first part of my colleague's question, our government is very focused on the health and safety of Canadians. All of our efforts have been focused on the health and safety of Canadians, particularly when it comes to food safety.

When it comes to the dates, on September 4, there were preliminary E. coli test results. The batch that those test results came from was quarantined and destroyed. What happened after that I explained, and actually the member in his own speech explained, the very complex supply chain that exists when there is a major slaughterhouse that deals with 4,000 head of cattle a day and produces hundreds of millions of pounds of beef product every year. Imagine the supply chain. I listed a number of different products that can be produced from the meat or meat trimmings coming from XL. The amount of effort that is needed to pursue that supply chain, to uncover what products are affected, takes time.

The important thing, and what Canadians need to know, is that the CFIA was engaged on this on September 4 when the preliminary E. coli results were presented. The CFIA has been engaged ever since and has been working around the clock to protect the health and safety of Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what we notice is that reading talking points in the House, saying whatever they want and blaming the opposition is behaviour the members opposite reserve for dealing with people they dislike, like the opposition, or people they choose to ignore, like Canadians.

There are people who are very interested in this issue, such as the beef producer I met in June. He was concerned about the opposition's support for a free trade agreement with Japan. I told him he should not worry about that and that he should instead worry about the health standards that his government was implementing because that is a greater threat to his livelihood than any position the opposition might have on free trade.

It is easy to lay blame, say whatever you want and read talking points, but I think that the people who became ill with E. coli see things differently. It is time to start telling them the truth.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, food safety and the health of Canadians are a priority for our government. Our government has taken the necessary initiatives to enhance our system and improve food safety.

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• (2015)

[English]

The member has been saying that I have been able to say whatever I want, but in my speech I was talking about facts. Unfortunately, the opposition has been making reckless comments. I have been saying that Canadian food is safe and Canadian beef is safe. There is a problem at XL. That is not what the opposition members have been saying. They have been waving their arms saying that all Canadian food is unsafe. That is unhelpful to Canadians.

If I wanted to get specific, I could mention specific measures to reinforce our food safety system which the member's party has voted against. I will encapsulate it. We have hired additional inspectors. The member's party voted against it. We put additional funding into the CFIA and food safety. The member's party voted against it. Those are facts. He might not have been here at the time, but he can check the record because that is true.

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I met with some representatives from the beef industry in Canada earlier this afternoon and they have a couple of requests. One request is that members of Parliament refrain from using exaggeration and hyperbole in discussing this issue. They said that the Canadian beef industry does not need to be threatened as it has had enough pressures over the last few years. They are asking if we would refrain from doing that and try to deal with the issue of food safety, which is the important issue here.

My first question tonight is to ask if the opposition will listen to the voices of beef producers across this country.

My second question is for the parliamentary secretary. He mentioned that the in-depth review of the plant actually determined that there was no single factor in the plant that led to the H7 E. coli contamination. Could he talk about some of the deficiencies that were identified and how the CFIA is now beginning to deal with those deficiencies in that plant?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, my colleague's first comment echoes my last response, in that I think all parliamentarians need to be responsible in the comments they make about food safety, particularly at a time like this.

I want to assure Canadians that Canadian food is safe. I think Canadians see all of the additional resources that we have delivered to the CFIA to ensure that Canadian food is safe. Canadian beef is safe as well. I want to highlight that.

There is a problem at XL Foods. It has been shut down and will not reopen until the CFIA determines that the XL plant is safe and that the product leaving the plant is safe.

In talking about the problems at XL, there have been corrective measures that the CFIA has demanded XL undertake. The plant will not reopen until those specific measures have been undertaken and the XL plant is determined to be safe by the CFIA.

[Translation]

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the Parliamentary Secretary was around in 2008 when the opposition successfully pushed for the creation of a special

committee to study the listeriosis crisis. He knows very well that, at that time, the Minister of Agriculture and even the then Minister of Health refused to accept any responsibility for the crisis. When I say that, I do not mean that they had to be accountable for everything that happened. However, four years later, we have the same minister, and he is again refusing to accept any responsibility for the health and safety of Canadians.

Will he not admit today that it is time for the minister to get serious and ensure that the same problems that surfaced in 2008 do not happen again? Did they learn nothing from the 23 deaths caused by the listeriosis crisis?

Mr. Pierre Lemieux: Mr. Speaker, I would like to point out that the minister and our government have taken steps to strengthen our food safety system and to provide the CFIA with more resources so that it can do what it needs to do. The member and his party voted against all these measures.

[English]

They have to account to Canadians for letting down Canadians when it comes to reinforcing our food safety system.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleagues for joining in this emergency debate on Canadian food safety. It is an extremely troubling issue that has come back to haunt us once again.

Let me first say that we feel for those who are ill, especially the young one in Alberta who suffered kidney failure and is drastically ill, and whose mom's pleas for help because there was something wrong went unanswered for, in her words, far too long. We on this side of the House would like to extend our best wishes for a speedy recovery to all of those folks who have fallen ill because of E. coli. Hopefully, they will have a speedy recovery with no ill effects in the future.

I would say unequivocally to the ranchers out there that we on this side of the House understand the dilemma they face. The ranchers across the country have done nothing wrong. They have worked hard to produce the best quality beef they can and they have been let down by a processor. Unfortunately, all of the links must work well in the value chain we have. The primary producers are doing the remarkable job they need to do and have done for decades, indeed eons if we go back to the early days of the pioneers on the Prairies.

What has happened in the processing part of the equation is the beef producers have been let down by a single processor which has now tarnished their image unfairly. We need to make sure that Canadians understand that. Indeed, we stand with those ranchers and say to Canadians in general that it is not the fault of the ranchers. What we need to do is address the situation that has happened at the processing plant.

I want to refer to some of my friend's comments about facts, as the parliamentary secretary likes to call them, and deal with the 700 net new inspectors.

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The problem with the net new inspectors is that the CFIA has this sense that everyone should be labelled as an inspector. There is this catch-all category of inspector in which everyone is placed. With most employers, inspectors are called inspectors, assemblers are called assemblers, and clerks are called clerks, but not at the CFIA. Everyone is called an inspector.

My friend from Malpeque will remember during the listeriosis crisis that we asked the vice-president of operations, the head counter, the bean counter, how many meat inspectors were on the front line. I could not have been any more specific when I asked that question. After giving five wrong answers because he had the numbers mixed up, he finally said that he did not know. He is still there, by the way.

To suggest that somehow there are 700 net new inspectors doing meat inspection is a fallacy. Of that number, there are 170 inspectors doing meat inspection, but they only do it in ready-to-eat meat plants. What is the distinction? XL is not a ready-to-eat meat plant. Maple Leaf Foods on Bartor Road in Weston, Ontario is a ready-to-eat meat plant. There is a huge distinction between the two.

There are 46 inspectors in a plant that actually slaughters and processes, on some days, 5,000 animals a day. We divide that number by 46 over two shifts. Technically, there are only 23 inspectors on the plant floor on one shift and 23 on the plant floor on the second shift. There are two shifts in that plant. Maybe they move a couple here and a couple there. Some may work day shift more than they work afternoon shift, but nonetheless, that is how we divvy it up. We are talking about 23 folks looking after 5,000 head of cattle and working in a facility that literally is city blocks large. This is not a butcher shop on the corner. It is an industrial plant. That is how one has to think about the scope of that facility.

● (2020)

Let me talk about facts. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency report on plans and priorities, signed and tabled by the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food himself on May 18, 2012, reads, "Planned spending is declining by approximately \$46.6 million and 314 FTEs," which means full-time equivalent. The member's minister signed the document just months ago saying that he intended to take out that amount of money and take out that number of people. That is a fact.

My hon. colleague across the way, the parliamentary secretary, should review the plans and priorities document that his minister signed.

He loves to talk about the \$100 million that the Conservatives have put in. The truth is that they have not put it in at all yet. They have spent \$18 million this year. It is a five-year phase-in program that talks about a specific program and then it ends. It does not go on forever. It ends, just like they sunset the listeria program. They stopped \$26 million in that program. That will end too. They will also take that money out. If we want to deal in facts, then we really need to put all the facts on the table, not just some of them.

What do we look at in the Conservatives' budget document, that massive omnibus bill they presented to us earlier in the year, and now we can see what it was about. They want to try to hide things in this great big document. What do we find? In budget 2012, the next

three year outlook for food safety indicates a projected cut of \$56.1 million on an annual basis, not just for a project, but on an ongoing basis, a continual basis, every year, year after year. That is a fact in the Conservatives' budget document.

My friend across the way will always say to me that I vote against that. He is absolutely right. If the Conservatives intend to bring another piece of legislation forward that says that they will take money and resources out of the CFIA, I will probably vote against that as well. Perhaps they should bring in something that is positive.

My friend wanted to talk about how all of this unravelled and what the timeline looked like. The CFIA actually has a very good timeline on its website. Anyone can go visit and take a look at it. There is a debate on who saw it first, but the Americans actually caught the E. coli on September 3. They did not tell Canadians until September 4. Canadians saw it on September 4 too. That is accepted. That is true. The parliamentary secretary has said that and it is true.

However, the Americans started to do some other things. They started asking questions because they do things in a different way. They destroyed the shipment and then they started to do other testing. What did we do on September 5? We issued what is called "a corrective action request" of the company. We did not issue an order. We did not make a demand. We said, "Would you please". That was on September 5. We got to September 6 and we were still going on, and they believed that August 24 and 28 were the days that perhaps were affected by E. coli on those particular slaughter days.

The parliamentary secretary wants us to believe it was just one incident but it was multiple pieces out of this one incident. Those were two different days. It was not one day, not one event. It was two different events. We cannot have one event on two different days. I guess we could when we think the facts are not real facts but might be facts.

What happened on September 7? The CFIA issued another corrective action request. It already issued one two days before. It had to do another one because the first one did not work. What was the company asked to do now? I am quoting now from the CFIA website. It reads:

XL Foods Inc. was formally requested to produce detailed information related to product details, distribution, sampling results, and information on the effectiveness of the plant's preventative controls as soon as possible but no later than September 10th.

It was also required to strengthen controls around sampling and testing of the products originating from the facility. It was a request on September 8 and 9. We are still waiting. Of course, it was a request, so we wait.

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● (2025)

September 10 and 11, the CFIA requested that XL Foods, back on September 6 and 7, give the information to them. The CFIA finally gets stuff identified on August 24 to 28. Now, September 5, the third event. That becomes an interest of investigation, not anything more than that. September 12, the CFIA's investigation continued. FSIS, which is American, notified the CFIA that it had found two more contaminated shipments from E. coli in sample beef trimmings from XL Foods.

What did we do? We are still on September 12. The CFIA, based on its investigations and the new U.S. findings, not Canadian findings, which found the next two cases on September 12, sends in a team of experts. We knew back on September 4 that something was amiss. We gave them two corrective action requests. Now the CFIA says that maybe it should send in a team now that the Americans have said that there are two additional E. coli samples from a different batch. The CFIA thought maybe it should do something, so it sent in a team to do an in-depth review. It went through all of that on September 12.

On September 13, the CFIA removed XL Foods from the list of establishments eligible to export to the U.S. What happened to us? If the stuff was not good enough to send to the U.S., why was it good enough for Canadians?

In any case, it went through and articulated some more requests. Here is what it came up with. It said that although XL Foods Inc. had monitoring measurements in place, trend analysis of the data collected was not being properly conducted. The CFIA knew this on September 13 but it still allowed XL Foods to continue. The CFIA said that while the company's measures for dealing with meat that tested positive for E. coli were properly laid out, they were not always being followed correctly. The company knew how to do it but it just was not.

That is our food safety system? The company knows how to do it but it is not going to do it. That is basically what the CFIA found out on September 13. The CFIA also said that it knew the containers that were contaminated by E. coli were not bracketed, in other words, those were not taken out of the stream before or after they were allowed to go to the fresh meat line, which is totally contrary to the protocols involved in health and safety. It continued anyway.

In the CFIA's own words, it said that it found out that sampling protocols were not always followed by plant staff which could have resulted in inaccurate tests. So now we are hearing that maybe staff cannot do it properly.

Then we get to September 16. The CFIA and XL Foods begin to issue health hazards. The Americans had already stopped shipments at the border three days earlier. They did not want any more. The CFIA agreed that the Americans did not want anymore. Now, three days later, the CFIA and XL Foods think that maybe they should tell the public there is an issue, and they issue a hazard alert. They said that it was probably the shipments from August 24 to 28 and September 5 that were contaminated and that they would look at them even closer.

Then we get to September 17. The CFIA said that when dealing with potentially unsafe food it needs to be sure that the right products

are identified, and so on. It said that it takes time. However, it did not take the Americans that much time or the CFIA. It is not about the Americans saying, "No, thank you", which they actually said. It is about the Canadian Food Inspection Agency saying, "I am taking away XL Foods' licence to export to the U.S.". It was not the other way around, as much as the Americans did not want the product.

On September 18, the CFIA issued five additional corrective action requests. We are now at number seven by my count. There are corrective action plans now, not on a specific incidents about the thing it was supposed to do, but new plans. Heaven knows why we would want to give people a new plan when they cannot do the old one, but this is the food inspection system.

It looks as if there are varying dates of corrective action. Depending on the risks, it moved around. Meanwhile, the U.S. has said, "No, thanks." The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has said, "No, thanks. We will not send it to you." They are still being sent to Canadians.

● (2030)

On September 21, the ongoing data review by the CFIA concluded that there were two additional production dates. There had already been three. My friend said that there was one. Now we are looking at August 27 and 29. Now we are August, 24, 27, 28, 29 and September 5. I am only a Glaswegian but I did learn my arithmetic and that is five events, five different days, five different things happening. Based on those conclusions, XL Foods began to notify customers in Canada on September 21 and recalled beef trimmings produced on August 27 to 29.

Then we jump to September 27. The CFIA announces that it has temporarily suspended the licence to operate establishment 38 XL Foods Inc. in Brooks, Alberta. The CFIA determined that inadequate controls for food safety were not fully implemented in the facility. The CFIA identified a number of deficiencies during an in-depth review of the facility. It went on to say that as of that date the company had not adequately implemented and agreed upon corrective actions and did not present acceptable plans to address longer term issues. What a marvellous conclusion. It only took seven corrective action requests but it only took two from the United States.

On September 3 and September 13, the CFIA said that no more products from the plant would go to the U.S. What about us? What happened to Canadians? Seven requests were made and none of them were followed through on.

At the end of all this, the CFIA finally said that the plant had to be closed. It is still closed, and so it should stay closed until such time as it is ready to operate in a proper way. However, in my view, there can be no faith in a self-regulating plant that does not know how to do the things it is supposed to do, does not understand how to do them and, when it is given specific requests by the CFIA, it does not carry them out. This begs the question: Why does the CFIA not take over the entire plant and stop the self-regulating process in that specific plant until it comes back on stream and credibility is back in that facility? That is what really needs to happen.

Where are we with all of this? I watched the minister's news conference today. I thought it was wholly informative, mesmerizing and captivating. He said, and I am paraphrasing because I do not have the exact quote, "We want safe food". We all do. Canadians are saying that they want safe food. The minister did not tell us anything else. However, as soon as the president of the CFIA stepped to the microphone and was about to answer a legitimate question and started to say that the agency did not have the authority under the present legislation to do anything else, which is inaccurate but maybe he misspoke, a political minder said that the news conference was over and asked Mr. Da Pont to move on. He is the president of the CFIA and a media staff person from the minister's office is telling him not to speak to Canadians in a public way and tell them exactly what happened. That is disgraceful. That is not transparent. That is not about telling Canadians how to build credibility back into a system that the government let fail them. That is not how credibility is built. Credibility is built by allowing the president of the CFIA to answer the questions and to tell Canadians exactly what happened.

Unfortunately, there is a bigger problem. The president of the CFIA does not understand that there is legislation in place today under section 13 of the Meat Inspection Act that allows inspectors to demand, not request, information they need to do their jobs now, not next week, not next month. The CFIA has a real problem when the top of the house does not know the legislation. That is what is wrong with that CFIA and that is what is wrong with ministerial accountability, because at the end of the day it is the minister who is responsible for ensuring that the system works, and the system is broken and it needs to be fixed.

• (2035)

To speak to Bill S-11, if my friend across the way had bothered to watch CBC today, he would have seen me say that we support Bill S-11 in principle, but we have some really good ideas and maybe for once the Conservatives ought to listen.

• (2040)

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Welland for his opening comments in particular.

First, we do want to express our sympathies to the families who are dealing with illness right now because of E. coli. We also want to recognize that the cattle industry here in Canada is the best cattle industry in the entire world.

My background has been as a cattle rancher. My father and three brothers are today still cattle ranching. In my riding of Selkirk—Interlake, we have 2,500 ranches and those ranch families there and farmers right across this country who raise our cattle do a fabulous job of raising healthy, wholesome livestock that are turned into wonderful food products.

However, I do have to take exception to some of his critique of the CFIA.

We have 170 new front-line meat inspectors in our plants in Lakeside. In the XL beef plant in Brooks alone there are 46 food inspectors. The way food inspection works is that in every plant, in every food inspection plant, they do what is called hazard analysis of critical control points, HACCP. Those critical points are where there

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are inspectors, where there is accountability, where there is a paper trail, and where there is testing so that we can catch whether there are going to be problems with food. Therefore, the CFIA was doing its job. It was doing the inspections.

To talk about transparency and accountability, everything is on the website. The CFIA has unveiled it to the press. It has unveiled it to the consumers. The CFIA will continue to build confidence among consumers and police the industry the way it is supposed to be policed.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, hopefully my friend from Selkirk—Interlake will pass along our thoughts to the cattle ranchers, his family specifically, and to others in that area. We understand the devastation that they are going through, unfairly so. I cannot say it often and loudly enough that it is of no fault of their own; they are caught in a situation not of their doing. This is not a fair place for them to be. However, it is a reality in a complex system where one piece of the system, a large piece, has failed. It is a plant that produces 35% of the beef in this country and it has failed us.

However, let me speak to this idea of 170 inspectors that we keep hearing about. Not one of those 170 inspectors went to the meat hygiene plants, which is XL, in Lakeside or in Brooks, or at Cargill or any of the others. They went to ready-to-eat meat plants. That is where they went. We can argue and debate the numbers. We know there are 40 inspectors and six vets in that plant at Brooks. That is true.

My friend talked about HACCP. There is no question that HACCP is a new system that folks have been implementing and that is supposed to work. The reality is that even the CFIA is now saying that the plant personnel, not CFIA inspectors because it is the plant personnel who actually do the spot-checking under the HACCP program, did not understand how to do it.

I do not care what the plan looks like. If they do not know what the plan is and they do not know how to implement the plan and they do not know how to do it because they are either not trained well enough or just do not know how to get it done, I do not care what plan they have, because a plan is bound to fail when folks do not understand how to make it happen.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for Welland for his thoughtful comments and insight. I have spent some time with him on this issue and I want to thank him for clearing the air on Bill S-11. It is not the panacea for food safety.

As members know, the CFIA already has the authority to demand whatever documents it requires. Frankly, in February of this year, the industry was reminded of that, that anything requested by the CFIA was to be produced and they were legally required to provide that information.

However, my question, more pointedly, is about the comprehensive audit that my party and I have been asking for. Every single time I have asked the parliamentary secretary when the audit would be provided, he has said, "Go to the website. It is there."

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Interestingly, I learned that in November 2010, Carole Swan, the former president of the CFIA, was asked about that very audit and if it had been completed. Do members know what she said? She said that the firm that had been hired, PricewaterhouseCoopers, had not conducted a traditional audit. It did not conduct it as an audit. An audit is a specific process. Instead, it was a detailed review.

I wonder if the member for Welland agrees with me that either the Auditor General or a third party should conduct a comprehensive audit of all of the CFIA resources and the adequacy of those resources, including human resources, to deal with this issue of food safety.

● (2045)

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, the compliance verification system, or CVS, is now the backbone of the government's safety regime. That is how the government wants it.

Sheila Weatherill said quite clearly in her report, and New Democrats said something somewhat similar in the subcommittee on listeriosis, that the pilot program being run in CVS, which was all that was happening in 2008, had to be evaluated and measured and a determination ultimately made whether it actually worked, because at that point it was just a pilot. No one knew if it worked or not.

That was not really done, although there was an audit by PriceWaterhouseCoopers. We can go back and forth on whether or not it was comprehensive on this or that. In my view, what ultimately happened was that we did not evaluate the pilot program to indicate that it was the program we should indeed build the backbone of the food safety regime on. Nor did we ever do an official audit in the traditional sense that would have given us adequate numbers to say how we should resource and purpose these particular CVS inspectors to make sure that the job gets done properly.

In my view the government, unfortunately, has taken the easy route out when it comes to that review by PriceWaterhouseCoopers rather than actually doing what New Democrats would consider to be an exhaustive audit to make sure that the program truly works and helps Canadians in the area of food safety.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. friend from Welland for directing us to the budget. We were told by the parliamentary secretary that the budget would contain new money for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. I think what we have here is a case of bait and switch.

If we go to page 168 of the budget, we will see the figure of \$51.2 million in new resources under "Strengthening Food Safety" in big letters. That \$51.2 million is over two years, split between three different agencies: the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Health Canada and the Public Health Agency. By my reckoning, that is about \$8 million a year if it were distributed evenly.

If we go to the fine print on page 261, which my friend from Welland noticed, we see \$2 million less this year, \$10 million less the next year and on an ongoing basis \$56 million less. Does my hon. friend agree with me that there is less money for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, relying on the facts in the budget?

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, as much as the other side continues to say that opposition members do not read its budget, lo and behold, we do.

There is one thing I can say about being a Glaswegian, that when it comes to numbers and money I am always looking. I will always find if someone is trying to shortchange someone else, because a nickel or penny to us Scots is expensive, and we are going to hunt for it.

I found that the budget intends to give less on an ongoing basis, as we head forward. Yes, my colleague is correct. It is written in tiny print, but I do wear glasses and if I have to really work at it, I shift the bad lens to the bad eye to make it look bigger and I can actually see it. That is how I am actually read that tiny print.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for his very thorough analysis of this issue and his sincere approach to it. The beef industry is very important in Alberta, but so is the slaughter industry. They go hand in glove.

I have spoken in the House before about my background in enforcement. We really need to get to the crux of this. The CVS, compliance verification system, is about the company verifying that it is complying with the law in any system it has in place. The enforcement role is for the government and we are seeing gaping holes. Does the member agree with me that it is time for the government to come clean and produce a clear enforcement compliance policy with clear directives on what enforcement action should be taken in each situation in the food industry?

● (2050)

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, I absolutely agree with my friend from Edmonton—Strathcona. She clearly understands what it means to have enforcement and regulatory teeth to make sure that we no longer get back to a situation where we are making requests. The requests did not work. Enforcement works. That is what we need.

I want to thank the member for her insight and the work she has done on the environmental file in her previous career in understanding that enforcement is what we need in all of this to ensure that those who will not do what they are asked to do will be forced to do it because they have no other choice. That is what is missing in all of this, that enforcement mechanism.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate.

As many members know, XL Foods is located in my riding in the city of Brooks, Alberta. I know many of the people who work there and know that they are very hard-working people.

First, I will reiterate what my colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, said. Food safety is a top priority of our government, and I will give some examples.

We have hired over 700 food inspectors since 2006, including 170 meat inspectors. Our government has implemented all 57 recommendations from the Weatherill report.

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If opposition members believe that the powers of the agency are not sufficient, they should support our government's legislation to make sure that CFIA will have greater authorities. Unfortunately, the member for Welland has already said that his party will challenge this important legislation. That is hypocritical.

We increased CFIA's budget of \$744 million by \$156 million, a 20% increase. It is clear that our government takes its job on food safety seriously.

The Liberal member for Malpeque has said that he personally believes our food is safe in Canada.

Moreover, an independent report states:

Canada is one of the best-performing countries in the 2010 Food Safety Performance World Ranking study. Its overall grade was superior—earning it a place among the top-tier countries

How about what Albert Chambers, executive director of the Canadian Supply Chain Food Safety Coalition, who said:

[The government] will position Canada's food safety regime well in the rapidly changing global regulatory environment.

I agree with these assessments and with the people of Brooks who strive every day to produce good quality food.

When Canadians buy food at the grocery store they expect it to be safe. When there is a recall of unsafe food products, it can shake people's confidence in our food supply system. It is easy to think that the system has broken down and needs to be replaced.

The ingestion of bacteria such as *E. coli* can cause serious and potentially life threatening illnesses. Our government takes any threat to the safety of our food supply very seriously. In fact, an OECD report has demonstrated that Canada has one of the best food safety systems in the world.

However, no system is foolproof. That is why there are safeguards in place to detect problems, and clear procedures and policies to address these problems as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Clearly, there is still some confusion about how the food safety system works. Given the ongoing concerns about *E. coli* in beef produced at XL Foods Inc., I think it would be useful to examine the elements that make up Canada's food safety system, including food recalls. I will also comment specifically on the expanded alerts issued by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Everyone plays a role in food safety: consumers, industry and government. Research shows that most Canadians know how to handle food safely, but many do not follow through on a daily basis. For example, in a survey, half of the respondents said that they sometimes defrosted meat and poultry at room temperature. However, this practice can allow bacteria to grow on food and can lead to illness.

There are four key rules to food safety that bear repeating: clean, separate, cook and chill. Food safety rules in the kitchen will still go a long way towards keeping families safe from harmful bacteria.

Industry obviously plays a critical role in the food safety system in Canada. All federally inspected meat and fish processing facilities must follow strict guidelines and rules for food safety. This involves

identifying what can go wrong, planning to prevent a problem and taking action when a problem is identified.

Industry must adopt science-based risk management practices to minimize food safety risks. To that end, industry works to identify potential sources of food contamination, to update production practices to reduce risk, to comply with inspection and testing protocols and to pull unsafe product from the market.

I will come back to the process of food recalls in a few moments.

● (2055)

Food safety begins with effective laws. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency, or CFIA, delivers all federally mandated programs for food inspection, plant and animal health products and production systems. In short, food safety is CFIA's top priority. As Canada's largest science-based regulator, the CFIA holds industry to account for the safety of its products, responds to food safety emergencies, carries out food recalls and prevents the spread of animal disease to humans. However, food safety is a complex mandate. That is why to protect our food supply, the CFIA works closely with a variety of partners, including Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada.

One of the CFIA's key jobs is to inspect both domestic and imported food. It also inspects, audits and tests products to verify that industry is complying with food safety regulations and enforces those regulations in federally registered food processing facilities.

Once the food safety system has identified a contaminated food product in the marketplace, an investigation takes place that can lead to a food recall. As in this case, most companies initiate a recall once a problem is identified with their products. They do this to protect the health and safety of Canadians and certainly to protect their own reputation.

When dealing with potentially unsafe food, the CFIA's investigations are driven by three considerations: accuracy, thoroughness and expediency.

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First, the CFIA works to get the facts straight. It analyzes production and distribution records, which can be in several locations. It locates food samples and conducts tests. It reviews labels, distribution and information and identification codes to help inform consumers about potential risks. In this way it strives to identify all affected products.

The gathering of facts is critical to a science-based thorough investigation. In the case of XL Foods, routine testing identified a positive *E. coli* sample on September 4. The CFIA has been investigating the problem and taking appropriate measures ever since.

The CFIA must balance the need for accurate and reliable information with the need to inform the public as soon as possible about potential risks. To achieve this balance, the CFIA issues regular alerts for recalled products while an investigation is ongoing. As a result, it may issue several public alerts for the same recall. Once a product is posed a health risk, it is recalled immediately. The CFIA does not wait.

This is an important point. The series of expanded alerts issued over the past weeks related to XL Foods reflect new information obtained during the course of a continuing investigation. This is a normal part of the recall process and in no way indicates unnecessary delays in informing the public about a health risk.

The CFIA expects industry to monitor higher than normal detection rates and to modify control measures accordingly. The agency's investigation has shown that XL Foods did not conduct its monitoring measures consistently at the Alberta facility. Moreover, the agency has discovered deviations from the company's control measures for *E. coli*. The company was not able to take adequate corrective action. As a result, the CFIA temporarily suspended the company's licence, and the meat plant remains under government oversight until further notice. At the same time, XL Foods continues to work with CFIA to identify and trace contaminated food products that may be in the market.

Let me be clear. The XL plant will not reopen until CFIA has certified it is safe.

As soon as it was aware, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency acted immediately to address the concern about the presence of *E. coli* in beef produced by XL Foods. The investigation continues, informed by science-based evidence and an ongoing commitment to protect the safety of Canada's food supply and the Canadian confidence in that food supply.

I want to take a few minutes to talk about the proposed safe food for Canadians bill introduced by our government in the Senate earlier this year.

In 1997 the CFIA was created to improve and modernize federal inspection activities related to food safety, animal health and plant protection. However, the creation of the agency was only the first step. Even in 1997, it was recognized that the legislative base for the agency would in time need to be modernized.

● (2100)

The aim of the proposed safe food for Canadians bill is to modernize and consolidate CFIA's food inspection and enforcement

authorities. The successful passage of this bill will deliver more consistent inspection and enforcement authorities covering the food safety aspects of CFIA's mandate. In this way our government can provide a more consistent and comprehensive approach to the agency's inspection enforcement and compliance activities around food.

This new food safety statute falls under the responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. It enhances public and food safety security by modernizing and consolidating provisions in the current Canada Agricultural Products Act, CAPA; Fish Inspection Act, FIA; Meat Inspection Act, MIA; and provisions related to food in the Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act, CPLA.

The proposed legislation strengthens the agency's ability to protect Canada's food supply. It provides more consistent authorities for the food commodities regulated by CFIA. What we will have is a uniform set of powers, duties and functions for all CFIA inspectors, no matter what sort of food product is being inspected. This can only deliver better food safety outcomes for Canadians.

Let me mention some of the major provisions of the bill. The proposed legislation will allow our government to take appropriate actions when safety issues arise by issuing tougher fines and penalties, establishing a system to better track, trace and recall harmful products and prohibiting unsafe foods from entering the Canadian market.

An extension of regulation making authorities for export certification will provide Canadian exporters with business predictability if trading partners make certification a condition of market access. This will be accomplished by providing credible assurance to importing countries that Canadian exports are safe.

The bill would make it illegal to knowingly submit false or misleading information to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food with regard to any commodity or products covered by the act. This would protect consumers from fraud.

There are elements of the bill that industry would like to see enacted. The bill includes specific prohibition related to threats of tampering, making claims to have tampered and actual tampering. It covers hoaxes with regard to food and packaging. Currently these activities fall under the general of mischief in the Criminal Code. They need to be specifically identified for what they are: criminal activities which should be covered by very specific legislation.

Of great importance to all Canadians is that the bill prohibits the import of food commodity that is adulterated, that has poisonous or harmful substances, that is unfit for human consumption or that is injurious to human health. Products that are labelled contrary to the proposed regulations will also be prohibited.

I do not want the House to misunderstand and believe there are no current provisions protecting Canadians from such things, but the proposed bill consolidates the various pieces of prior legislation so these prohibitions reside in a single act instead of several different acts which only had bearing on specific commodities.

These acts, enacted at different times in our nation's history, provide an uneven and outdated legislative base that makes it difficult to deal with various issues in a uniform way. We need to enact this new legislation which brings all of these various commodities under a single umbrella.

By consolidating the authorities in the act into one consistent set of authorities under the bill, we give the CFIA the tools it needs to better protect Canadians and to enhance industry compliance. The CFIA will be better able to strengthen the security of the food supply and better protect Canadians' health.

They will give the CFIA enforcement and inspection powers that are similar to those in the consumer products legislation, Bill C-36. The bill will enhance existing inspection and enforcement tools at the Canada-U.S. border, providing the Canada Border Services Agency officers and CFIA inspectors with better controls when enforcing CFIA legislation on our border, at airports and in our shipping ports.

It is important to make clear what the bill does not do. The current roles and responsibilities of the Minister of Health and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food will not change as a result of the bill. The Minister of Health remains responsible for setting policy and standards for food safety and nutritional quality. The CFIA will be responsible for enforcing these standards, as well as setting and enforcing other standards.

We are all familiar with the tragic deaths and illness resulting from a listeriosis outbreak in 2008. Hard lessons were learned from that event. Since the agency was formed, we have also had to deal with BSE, salmonella, E.coli and other threats that keep the importance of food safety in the Canadian consciousness.

• (2105)

It is because of this awareness of the potential threats that the concept behind the proposed safe food for Canadians bill has support from stakeholders and is seen as a benefit to all Canadians.

The listeriosis outbreak of 2008 prompted the Prime Minister to name an independent investigator, Sheila Weatherill, to look into the circumstances of the tragedy and make recommendations to our government on how to avoid having similar events occur in the future.

One of the recommendations, number 43 of 57, states that the government should "simplify and modernize federal legislation and regulations which significantly affect food safety".

That is precisely what this proposed bill sets out to do. Our government committed to addressing all 57 of the independent investigator's recommendations. We are therefore duty bound to protect Canadians from future tragedy and see this legislation through.

Our government has a solid reputation for the safety of our food supply and we want to give the CFIA the inspection and enforcement capabilities that it needs to maintain that reputation and to build on it. I urge all hon. senators to join me in supporting this bill.

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I want to reiterate that the XL Food plant will remain closed until such time as it meets all regulations and requirements of CFIA.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let me first indicate what I said when I first started my speech about Bill S-11 in the Senate. Perhaps the member did not hear what I said, which was that we would support Bill S-11 in principle and that we had some very good ideas to help make it a better bill. Hopefully the government will hear those better ideas. The parliamentary secretary said to me that we did not support it. That is not true. At this point in time, we support it in principle.

Regarding budgets, the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food said on May 8 in the planned spending and priorities for the CFIA, "Planned Spending is declining by approximately \$46.6 million and 314 FTE's from 2012-13 to 2014-15". That is in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's report on plans and priorities, which was signed and tabled by the minister.

Does the member not agree with me that he is actually taking resources away from CFIA?

Mr. LaVar Payne: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague from Welland and I sit on the agriculture committee, so I often have an opportunity to congratulate him on some of his comments during our committee meetings.

In terms of the budget, we have added funds for new programs. My response for my friend from Welland, and I am sure as a member of the opposition he may not quite understand this, is that sometimes when we are reorganizing, we are looking for efficiencies and ways to save some funding. However, those probably do not have anything to do with inspection. They include administrative issues. Therefore, those budget changes will not have any impact on CFIA inspections.

• (2110)

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I, too, send my sympathies to the patients and families in Alberta and also to the workers in the member's riding who now are without work for an unlimited length of time. This must be tough for the member. The ranchers in his riding also are very concerned that this needed to be dealt with differently.

The member raised the listeriosis issue. I hope the member has read all the reports that have come forward. We are very concerned there is a difference between committing to the 57 recommendations and actually implementing them. The member for Guelph has pointed out in terms of this audit of where the bodies are.

My understanding is that once an organism is in the food chain, that then becomes a public health issue. Does the member think that the Minister of Health and the Chief Public Health Officer for Canada should be the people to look at the camera and talk to Canadians about what to do to ensure their food safety is everything it can be and to ensure this outbreak is contained as quickly as possible in order to get the people in your riding back to work and your ranchers back and able to sell their product?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I would like to remind all hon. members to direct their comments to the Chair rather than to their colleagues.

The hon. member for Medicine Hat.

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Mr. LaVar Payne: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's sympathy and empathy for our cattle ranchers, for those people who are sick and may have been affected by E. coli, and certainly for the workers in Brooks. Certainly, there is a much broader picture than the employees as it does affect people right across the country. What I can say is that the CFIA is responsible for ensuring that inspections take place in that facility and that the food is safe.

The CFIA reports to the Minister of Agriculture. For that particular reason, he is one of the individuals who will communicate with Canadians, as well as consult with our colleague, the Minister of Health.

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I feel privileged to take part in this debate tonight, but I do need to share with hon. members that I am a little saddened that such a serious issue has become such a partisan debate. People have become ill because of this unfortunate situation.

Mr. Peter Julian: You are responsible.

Hon. Ted Menzies: There are many people working on this. We have broadened the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's mandate.

Hon. Wayne Easter: You should call for the minister's resignation.

Hon. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, there are hecklers from the meat department over on the far side who are still trying to make this a partisan debate and that is sad.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Call for the minister's resignation.

Hon. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, it is incredibly sad that the health of people is at risk and that individual keeps heckling. There are serious consequences to people becoming ill.

We have expanded the mandate of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. We have increased the number of individuals who are working on this issue. The opposition is scaring Canadians and making partisan points regarding a food system that has some minor problems. We are looking forward to fixing those problems.

I would ask the hon. member for Medicine Hat if his constituents are concerned about how the opposition is making a partisan debacle out of this issue. This is a very serious issue that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. The hon. member for Medicine Hat.

• (2115)

Mr. LaVar Payne: Mr. Speaker, this definitely is an issue that is of concern across all party lines. We do not want to make this into any kind of political issue. We want to ensure that those individuals who are having problems get the appropriate medical attention.

As well, we need to keep in mind that others are also affected, such as the workers and the city of Brooks. We need to work with the CFIA to ensure that inspections and corrections take place as quickly as possible so that XL meets all of the standards. Then those people will be able to go back to work at the facility to send our great Alberta beef products right across the country as well as abroad.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Welland for his passionate

remarks and also for his request for this emergency debate tonight. It is very timely and important.

The member across the way mentioned efficiencies. I also heard about the broadened powers of the CFIA.

The Conservatives are big proponents of increased self-regulation. If we consider what that actually means, it means there are more inspectors looking at paper as opposed to meat.

I also want to emphasize that the Conservatives need to accept responsibility for gutting food safety resources. They talk about adding resources. They are telling us that they have a world-class food inspection system. If that is the case, why do we have this problem at the XL Food plant, the biggest food recall in Canadian history? It is a simple question.

Mr. LaVar Payne: Mr. Speaker, contrary to what the hon. member said, we have actually increased the funding to the CFIA. There are 700 new inspectors; 170 meat inspectors. There are six new meat inspectors in the XL facility.

An hon. member: Where are they?

Mr. LaVar Payne: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. members over there would be quiet, I would be able to respond to the question. I am being interrupted. The hon. member sitting over there already has put his foot in his mouth. He has his own problems.

Our government is very interested in making sure that this is corrected as quickly as possible. I want to remind members that this facility will not reopen until such time as the CFIA has actually given it clearance.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Burnaby—New Westminster.

I congratulate my colleague on his speech. I want to point out that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has a role to play. As elected representatives, we also have a role to play. Where does the responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food lie in this issue? We do not see it, and that is worrisome.

This is the largest recall of meat in history. It is worrisome and really incredible in 2012. How can a country like Canada find itself in this situation?

On September 4, tests revealed a risk of E. coli contamination. The United States found out about the contamination on September 3. Last week, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency announced the suspension of the operating licence of the XL Foods processing plant in Brooks, Alberta. This means that the plant remained in operation for over three weeks after the first suspicions, until September 27. This is unacceptable. Thousands of Canadians were exposed to E. coli because of this delay.

Why wait 24 days to close a plant where such a problem had been detected? That is the question. It seems to me that, faced with such a situation, it is better to proceed with caution and to take action as soon as there is a risk that food safety for Canadians may be compromised.

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It took several days of investigation and tests for the CFIA to come to the conclusion that it was necessary to shut down the plant in Alberta. That is what we condemn. It is not only the safety of Canadians that is at stake, but also our trade relations and our credibility with the public.

Since September 16, the CFIA has issued at least eight alerts for recalled beef products from the XL Foods plant, because it fears *E. coli* contamination. This recall affects thousands of products. The recall of meat is growing every day. In Quebec, the recall of beef products that may have been contaminated with *E. coli* is getting larger.

In addition to the ground beef already identified elsewhere in the country, there are now other meat cuts sold all over Quebec. Even more worrisome is the fact that the recall also includes unlabelled and no-name beef products sold in retail stores, local meat markets and butcher shops. People are worried, and understandably so.

I would like to read some comments I received from the people of Berthier—Maskinongé. Before the *E. coli* crisis, I asked the people of my riding what some of their concerns were. Here is part of a letter from a woman from Saint-Alexis-des-Monts:

The reinstatement of Canadian Food Inspection Agency inspectors is urgent and crucial. Canadians should be able to buy any of the food offered for sale in Canada with full confidence.

This comment was sent to me before the crisis. Does anyone here believe that Canadians can trust the food inspection system? A system that took 24 days to close a plant that was producing contaminated meat? A system that took 12 days to even warn Canadians? A system that allowed tainted meat to make its way to our store shelves? I do not think so.

Another woman wrote, “We have 18-month-old twins and when we read labels, it is very worrisome.”

Parents should not have to worry about what they are feeding their children. In Canada, it seems they do need to worry. We should be able to trust our food safety system. As a mother, my thoughts are with Christina Lees, whose son Elijah got sick. She said she felt powerless and was angry that her son got sick and that it could happen to other people.

As parents and elected officials, we have a job to do. The minister has a responsibility. This is the second time this has happened in five years. If it were one of our children or one of our family members who became sick because of *E. coli*, would that make a difference?

● (2120)

Would changes at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency happen more quickly? Perhaps.

Why did it take so long to act, and more specifically, why did the government not learn its lesson from the listeriosis crisis? I get the impression that the recent cuts to CFIA are setting us back five years.

Food inspection is less regulated. It seems obvious that the government took a long time to act because of a lack of resources. The Conservative government's draconian cuts and the limited resources at CFIA increase the risk of this happening again.

This spring, the Conservatives tabled their Trojan Horse budget. I do not think anyone has forgotten that massive bill. How could we forget a 425-page bill?

In that budget, the Conservatives decided to take an axe to public services, and Canadians are paying the price. Food inspection is extremely important. That is not the place for budget cuts.

According to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's reports on plans and priorities for 2012-13 and 2014-15, planned spending is declining by approximately \$46.6 million, and the number of full-time employees is going down by 314.

On April 25, 2012, I asked what effects the cuts would have on food safety, and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture responded, “...what I said was that no cost-cutting measure will compromise food safety.” Look at where we are now.

Look at the situation we are in now. We have the largest beef recall in Canadian history. That is a big deal. When a government makes cuts to food inspection, there are consequences. The work that inspectors and veterinarians do is essential to Canadians' safety.

The Conservatives love to talk about their food safety bill, Bill S-11. They also love to say that the New Democrats will vote against this bill. First, I never said that I would vote against it. We need more measures to protect food safety in Canada.

The truth is that this bill was introduced in the Senate instead of the House of Commons. Why? This means that we have not had the chance to debate this bill, because it is currently being debated by non-elected officials. Why would they introduce it in the Senate? Are the Conservatives afraid?

If they are proud of their bill, why not introduce it in the House of Commons? Why not let my colleagues debate it in the House? That is what we are waiting for.

In the summer of 2008, the listeriosis crisis resulted in the recall of Maple Leaf deli meats. This crisis shook consumers' confidence and revealed obvious flaws in the food inspection system.

Some of the findings of the independent investigation that the federal government asked Sheila Weatherill to conduct following the 2008 listeriosis outbreak included a lack of focus on food safety among senior management in both private and public domains, a lack of planning and preparation, and a lack of communication with the public and among the various organizations.

At the time, the first case of food poisoning related to the consumption of a product made at the Maple Leaf processing plant was reported the week of June 1, 2008. The first recall was issued on August 17. In the meantime, products that were potentially contaminated with listeria continued to be sold across the country. The current situation bears a striking resemblance to that incident.

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Many recommendations were made. Ms. Weatherill urged the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to establish product control requirements following positive test results for listeria on food contact surfaces. This measure would make it possible to ensure that contaminated food was withdrawn before it was distributed to consumers.

As a result, the government took steps to prevent such a situation from happening again. However, the government now wants to do more with less. We all know we cannot do more with less.

Wishful thinking will get us nowhere, and food safety for Canadian families must be paramount.

● (2125)

We cannot put a price tag on food safety.

When will the Conservatives demonstrate transparency to the Canadian public? When will the government take action to ensure the safety of Canadians? When will the government admit that it is responsible for this situation?

[*English*]

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member spoke about food safety and the NDP's commitment to food safety. She also spoke about Bill S-11, which is in the Senate. We have just been informed today that in fact the NDP may not be voting against it. I would like to know what the member likes in that bill and what she does not like in that bill, because the bill will be coming to the House and I would like an assurance as to whether or not she will be voting for it.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Mr. Speaker, I do have the bill and I think it is a good piece of legislation. This is a step in the right direction, but it needs more meat on its bones. This is not enough.

We actually have some quotes if I could find them in time.

● (2130)

[*Translation*]

With regard to Bill S-11, Bob Kingston said that, unless the government committed to providing the necessary resources, Canadians could not expect to see improvements to food safety as a result of this one bill.

[*English*]

This is not enough. We have other statements saying this is not enough.

I will vote for it, but we will have many amendments and I hope the members opposite are open to them.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member sits on the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food. There has been a great attempt tonight by the parliamentary secretary, using the same old talking points, to try to shift the blame from ministerial accountability and responsibility to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

We are still trying to determine what rock the minister is hiding under tonight after he escaped the press conference this afternoon and hauled the president of CFIA away from speaking to the Canadian people.

I ask the member, as she has sat on the committee—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. The hon. member for Selkirk—Interlake is rising on a point of order.

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Speaker, even though we are in an emergency debate, the rules of the House still apply. We cannot refer to any member being absent from the House.

I would ask the member for Malpeque to retract that statement.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. member for Malpeque is well aware of the rules. As he knows, who is or who is not in this chamber should not be referenced directly. I am not sure if that is what he did, but could the member for Malpeque also quickly come to his question?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Yes, I could, Mr. Speaker. I do not think I said whether the minister is here or not. I just asked what rock he was hiding under.

The member has sat on the committee, which had the Canadian Food Inspection Agency before it several times as well as the minister. Who does she think is ultimately accountable and responsible for this issue, the biggest food recall in Canada? Is it the same minister who was in charge when 23 people died a few years ago?

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: I really do enjoy working with you on the committee. You too, Pierre—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): I am not on the committee, but could the hon. member address her comments to the chair.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Mr. Speaker, obviously, it is the minister's responsibility. Why do we have ministers if they are not held accountable? He has to be held to account. This is the second time it has happened. Do we need someone else to pass away? I think this is enough.

As I said, if one of our family members got sick, would the situation be different? Would we be having this debate? There would have been more movement. I think something would have happened faster. I do not want anyone else to get sick.

We are elected members of Parliament. We have a job to do. Enough passing the blame, let us move to action.

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was sad to hear, just a few moments ago, the Minister of State (Finance), who I have a lot of respect for, say that this was a minor problem. It is fair to say that from the perspective of the family of five-year-old Elijah who experienced liver failure and severe sickness as a result of this contamination and from the perspective of the 12, 15 or 20 families affected, we really do not know how many yet, it is not a minor problem at all. It is a very serious problem.

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I would like to thank the member for Berthier—Maskinongé for her comments in the House. I simply do not accept the sense that I am getting from the government that this is not its responsibility and that somehow it is someone else's fault, the CFIA's fault, the opposition's fault or some other dark force's fault, and not its fault that as a result of the cuts that we have been speaking to tonight a couple dozen families now have someone with severe sickness. It is not anyone else's fault. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that our systems are safe and the food that we eat is safe. What has happened over the last few weeks is that those systems have failed.

I would like to take a few moments to explain what I feel is the smoking gun for what has transpired over the last few weeks. The member for Welland was very detailed in his presentation. He went over every week of the outbreak as families fell sick, as the recalls seemed to cascade, one on top of the other, and the government seemed incapable of acting effectively. The important date is September 13. I know there are a lot of people across the country listening to this debate tonight so it is important to explain what happened on September 13 and how that has had an impact on our food systems overall.

On September 13, as the member for Welland spoke about just a few minutes ago, the CFIA removed XL. It is a plant that I have visited. I stood with the workers outside that plant just a few years ago with the member for Hamilton Centre. I visited that plant and know the workers and the plant well. On that date, the U.S. permit was pulled. XL was banned from exporting meat to the United States because of contamination. Obviously, there were fears then that exporting that meat would make people in the United States sick.

There was no recall in Canada. There was no protection for Canadian families. Other Canadian families have gotten sick since that date. However, that very same day, September 13, 2012, as the export permit was pulled due to fears of U.S. families getting sick, the meat continued to be shipped into Canada.

On September 13, as well, 481 employees in CFIA received affected notices, which are potential layoff and transfer notices. The very same day we have an outbreak of enormous proportions, such as we have never seen before in our meat supply in Canada, and that is the day that the government chose to send out to nearly 500 CFIA employees notices indicating they will be either laid off or transferred out of CFIA.

That is incredible. It is incredible that the very day we are seeing this tragedy unfold, the Conservative government says it is going to cut back even further. We have heard a lot tonight about what the government has done around cutbacks and how that may have contributed to the tragedy we see before us.

Let us look at what has actually happened over the past few years since the listeriosis outbreak. When we talk about meat hygiene and slaughter program inspectors at that plant, there was no increase in the number of positions.

Mr. LaVar Payne: Six new ones.

Mr. Peter Julian: There was no increase in the number of positions. There has been what I think is a lot of misinformation coming from the government side. There were 46 positions before. There are 46 positions now. That did not change.

● (2135)

When we hear government saying things that are inaccurate, the Canadian public is very intelligent and they can connect the dots. There were 46 positions before and now there are 46 positions.

The important thing to remember in all of this is that over that period with the same number of inspectors, the volume of meat being processed at that plant increased by 20%. With a 20% increase in the volume being processed at that plant and the number of inspectors, regardless of what the government says, was never increased.

This is the real tragedy. On September 13, the government slashed 500 positions from the CFIA and sent out affected notices. At the same time, over the last few years, despite the government's pretense around dealing with what is a very serious issue, the issue of food safety, in that plant, as the volume increased, the number of inspectors was not increased. There was a 20% increase in volume, a 20% increase in the workload and the government did not increase the number of inspectors.

The proof there is that compliance was transferred over to the company itself. It was self-serve safety. It was simply going to let the company take care of itself. The government was not going to increase the number of inspectors, even though the volume was increasing. It was just going to pretend that it had dealt with what should be a very important food inspection system by letting the company take care of it.

The company did not take care of it. Through the evidence that the member for Welland presented, we have seen that over the course of the weeks the tragedy increased. We still do not know how many additional Canadian families will have a severe sickness. We still do not know, given the size and scope of the recall and the fact that it has to stretch right across the country, if other families will be sick tonight.

Through all of that, and this is what I find the most disconcerting being in this House of Commons, we have not had a single government spokesperson stand up and say, "We were wrong to do this." We have not had a single government spokesperson stand up and say, "Sorry" to the Canadian public, "We should not have cut back. We should have increased the number of inspectors. We apologize for not taking care of you."

That is what government should do: be responsible. Through this entire week, despite the fact that we have had questions from the member for Welland, the member for Berthier—Maskinongé and repeated questions in the House, we have not seen the minister who is supposed to be responsible stand up a single time this week to respond to the questions about what he knew, when he knew it, whether he understood the impacts of the cuts, whether he understood what not increasing the number of inspectors when the massive volume increased by over 20% meant, and why he did not make any of those key decisions that would have perhaps resulted in our avoiding what is now a second tragedy from the government.

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This is really what this emergency debate is all about. This is why the opposition asked for this emergency debate. We are asking for answers. We have been trying to ask questions in the House. The Minister of Agriculture has not stood up a single time to explain to Canadians what happened.

We had a news conference where the CFIA president was trying to give Canadians an explanation but was pulled away from the media by a political staffer. He was pulled away from the journalists who were asking questions on behalf of Canadians and he was not able to respond.

Tonight, we have not had a single representative from the government stand up, look Canadians in the eye and say, "We are sorry. We were wrong not to increase the number of inspectors. We are sorry. We were wrong to cut back by 500 positions the very day that XL Foods was banned from exporting meat to the United States because it was afraid of consumers in the United States getting sick."

Canadian families deserve to have a food safety system they can trust, so that when they buy that food they can trust that it will be safe for themselves and their families. Canadian families deserve much better than what they have gotten from the government. We would like to hear some answers from the government tonight. We would like it to explain what went wrong and how it will fix it.

● (2140)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to go back to budget 2012 where, very clearly, spending for food safety did increase by \$50 million. The member points out that, no, there were cuts to the CFIA. I do want to put a question to him that is very pertinent to the budget.

In three provinces here in Canada, there are more than 50 federal food inspectors who are doing the job of provincial food inspection. This makes no sense at all. So, that budget moves the financial resources and the inspectors over to the province where they rightly belong, where they will carry out provincial food inspections as provincial food inspectors.

Does the member call that a cut or does he call it a transfer? I call it a transfer, but how does he see that?

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, for the families who have fallen sick as a result of what was clearly a government's irresponsible actions, I do not think the words matter too much. What matters to them is that their food has not been safe because of the actions of the government. What matters to them is 481 CFIA food inspectors being transferred out or laid off because of the cuts that came as a result of the budget of last spring. Three hundred and eight positions that the government acknowledges it was cutting. Now we are up to 481.

What matters to Canadians is having safe food.

We are saying on the floor of the House of Commons, speaking for Canadians right now, that the government has to fix what it broke. It has to restore confidence in our food safety system. So, get to work. Please do the job.

● (2145)

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Burnaby—New Westminster his thoughtful and passionate remarks. He expressed some alarm over what events occurred on the 13th, alarm with which I, frankly, agree.

I wonder if he has the same alarm, same concern, over the length of time between the date on which Canada became aware of the E. coli on the 4th and the time on the 16th, 12 days later, when it finally issued a recall, 3 days after the event on the 13th when the Americans decertified the plant.

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I think the member for Guelph is absolutely right. This is something that is of great concern to Canadians.

Here we have a ministerial responsibility and the minister is not responding to questions on this at all. What he needs to do is rise in this House of Commons and tell Canadians why, when food was not safe for American families, it was safe, according to him, for Canadian families. He needs to explain that. He needs to come clean to Canadian families. He needs to come clean to the families that are sick as a result of the government's actions. He needs to explain why, for 72 hours or three days, it was okay for Canadians to eat meat that was contaminated but was not okay for American families to eat. The Conservatives need to answer that question. I hope sometime tonight someone will answer that question for Canadian families.

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I do not think the Conservatives will answer that question because they are around and they will not get to that. The Conservatives keep getting up and talking about Bill S-11 in the Senate.

We are in 2012. Does the member really believe that we need a new law for the government to take the responsibility that it should have taken before? Does that mean that in our country we did not have the law to ensure the safety of Canadian men, women and children? Is that what the government is saying right now?

Mr. Peter Julian: Mr. Speaker, I think more and more Canadian families who are watching tonight are absolutely perplexed and dramatically concerned by the reaction of the government. We have heard some of the government spokespeople stand tonight and say that there is a piece of paper in the Senate that will solve all the sickness that people are experiencing right now, that the inspection system that has broken down because of Conservative cutbacks will be fixed by that piece of paper in the Senate. Really, everybody, that piece of paper in the Senate is going to solve all our problems.

We on this side of the House know that it is not a piece of paper that will make a difference for Canadian families. It is having in place a food safety system that Canadian families deserve. That is what will make a difference.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to extend my heartfelt concerns to the patients and families impacted. I know that all members of the House hope for their speedy recovery.

As someone who has spent her career in the health care field, I am honoured to rise and speak to this critically important issue today.

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As the hon. Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and the president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency said in Calgary earlier today, Canadian consumers and their families have always been and will continue to be our government's first priority when it comes to food safety. Our government and all Canadians expect a strong food safety system and that is why our government is doing its part.

It is important that we refrain from hyperbole and rhetoric. We must stay focused and we must keep our discussions firmly rooted in science and those things that focus on Canadian families. That is why I want to provide some facts.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency acted to contain contaminated products beginning on September 4 and has been acting ever since. The XL Foods plant will not be allowed to reopen until the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has certified that it is safe. Our government has hired over 700 food inspectors since 2006, including 170 meat inspectors. Our government has implemented all 57 recommendations from the Weatherill report.

If the opposition believes that the powers of the agency are not sufficient, it should support the government's legislation, Bill S-11, the safe food for Canadians act, to ensure that the CFIA has greater authority.

We increased the CFIA's budget by \$156 million, \$744 million total budget, for a 20% increase.

I would also like to add as a health care professional that I am happy to see that our economic action plan 2012 facilitates Health Canada to respond faster to new scientific and safety information. Previously, a 36-month delay existed in the implementing of approved food additives to stop the growth of harmful bacteria. Now it is six months, a huge improvement that benefits Canadian patients and the Canadian consumer.

Those are facts. What the opposition is doing is resorting to hearsay and fear-mongering, which does a grave disservice to Canadians who rely on us for the sound, factual information they need to protect themselves and their families.

E. coli refers to a large group of bacteria that is commonly found in the intestines of humans and animals. Most strains of E. coli do not cause acute illness in humans. However, some strains, such as E. coli 0157:H7, can make people sick. Serious complications of an E. coli 0157:H7 infection can cause kidney failure and other challenges for patients. E. coli infections are generally caused by eating contaminated foods, drinking contaminated water or coming into direct contact with someone who is sick or with an animal that carries the bacteria.

The Public Health Agency of Canada closely tracks E. coli cases across the country. Over the past decade, we have seen a marked decline in the incidence of E. coli 0157:H7 as reported by the Public Health Agency of Canada's national enteric surveillance program. In 2001, the number of cases of E. coli 0157:H7 was half that reported in 2006. The data reported in 2012 is undergoing validation currently. It continues to show a downward trend. This is a positive trend based on fact not fiction. However, we must remain vigilant.

The Public Health Agency of Canada works closely with the provinces and territories to track the number of certain E. coli cases across the country. When people get sick they go to the doctor. The doctors, in many cases, take samples from the patients and send them to local, provincial, territorial or federal labs for testing. That is the normal practice. These labs test the samples to identify the organism causing illness and may conduct further testing to identify the genetic footprint of the bacteria.

It is important to note that the provinces are the lead when it comes to these health issues. Provincial and territorial labs report weekly to the national enteric surveillance program the number of E. coli cases identified in their province or territory. The laboratories may also then post the results of the tests of the genetic fingerprint on the PulseNet Canada system, a national network that allows microbiologists to track and share genetic fingerprints for comparison across the country.

• (2150)

All labs then compare their results with those posted on PulseNet to find matches and identify outbreaks. PulseNet Canada is coordinated by the Public Health Agency of Canada's National Microbiology Laboratory in Winnipeg.

The Canadian notifiable disease surveillance system also tracks the total number of E. coli infections each year, as well as the age and sex of the cases. This system is best for understanding if there is an increase or decrease in illness over time.

Outbreaks may occur in a community, a single province, or multiple provinces, and not all outbreaks are reported at the national level.

We are taking every means possible to ensure that consumers have the information they need to protect themselves and their families. We know that E. coli infections can be caused by many things, whether it is improper cooking of beef; raw fruits and uncooked vegetables; untreated drinking water; unpasteurized raw milk products, including raw milk cheese; unpasteurized apple cider or juice; or direct contact with animals at petting zoos or farms. We are acting to make sure that Canadians know of these potential causes of E. coli infection.

Food can also be contaminated when it is handled by a person who is infected with E. coli or by cross-contamination because of unsanitary food handling processes. Raw fruits and vegetables can become contaminated with E. coli in the field from improperly composted manure, contaminated water, wildlife, or poor hygiene by farm workers. As well, E. coli infections can spread easily from person to person, as we see often in hospital settings.

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Proper hygiene and safe food handling and preparation practices are key to preventing the spread of E. coli. Handwashing is one of the best ways to prevent the spread of food-borne illnesses.

I am hearing a fair amount from my colleagues in the Liberal Party. I think it is extremely important that every Canadian understand that handwashing is the best way to prevent the spread of food-borne illnesses.

Contaminated foods may look and smell normal, and it is important to ensure that consumers thoroughly cook foods to destroy bacteria.

As the Right Hon. Prime Minister noted in this House earlier today, Canada's food safety record is among the best in the world. In fact, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development has said:

Canada is one of the best-performing countries in the 2010 Food Safety Performance World Ranking study. Its overall grade was superior—earning it a place among the top-tier countries.

However, we are not complacent. Our government will continue to improve the food inspection system through the safe food for Canadians act, which we introduced this spring.

Bill S-11 would consolidate food safety authorities from several existing acts, allowing all foods to be inspected in a uniform way. More consistent inspection will provide Canadian consumers with even stronger food safety outcomes.

Furthermore, the safe food for Canadians act would enable the CFIA to better address certain food safety concerns, such as tampering. It would also enhance our capacity to trace food from farm to fork and introduce greater controls for imported foods. Canadians can be assured that we are confident in our ability to implement these improvements once the legislation is passed.

The member for Welland, on the one hand, I must say, likes to talk about increased food safety, but he then says that he opposes this important legislation. This is the same member who claimed that the CFIA would allow roadkill into the Canadian food chain. This is quite outrageous. The member has zero credibility when it comes to food safety.

The proposed legislation is only one part of our ongoing efforts to enhance the food safety system. We are building a stronger foundation for the delivery of CFIA's programs through an update of regulations.

Our existing regulations continue to serve Canadians well, but we want to take advantage of opportunities to reduce overlap, address gaps and provide regulated parties with clarity and flexibility.

Although renewing our legislative and regulatory base is important, it is the work of inspectors that is central to a modern and effective food safety system. This is why the CFIA has hired more than 700 inspectors since 2006, including 170 meat inspectors. It is also the reason budget 2011 provided the CFIA with \$100 million over five years to modernize food safety inspection in Canada.

We are improving inspection delivery, training and tools for inspection staff, scientific capacity in food laboratories and information management and technology.

● (2155)

This funding and additional investments in food safety clearly underscore the CFIA's pledge to deliver to Canadians the protection they deserve and expect.

Budget 2012 reaffirmed our government's strong commitment to food safety with more than \$51 million over two years to strengthen the food safety system.

Our government immediately accepted all 57 recommendations of the Weatherill report. We have acted on all of them and have invested significantly in acting on them. We have improved our ability to prevent, detect and respond to future food-borne illness outbreaks. We have increased our efforts to make information available to Canadians about the steps they can take to protect themselves. We introduced a new food safety bill to simplify and modernize legislation. All of this work is part of our effort to better protect Canadians from unsafe food.

When food recalls happen, all levels of government and industry must be able to respond quickly and effectively. Our government has engaged industry leaders in open and frank conversations about food safety policy, standards and best practices. We are working with experts across the country to continue to strengthen our food safety system. We are continually improving Canada's food safety system, ensuring that the provincial and territorial governments, industry, health and consumer groups, and international food experts are all working together on behalf of Canadians.

Over the last two years, the agencies have improved our ability to share information so that all Canadians can react more quickly and effectively in responding to food safety problems.

Our efforts will not stop here. Our government remains committed to taking the action necessary to ensure that our food safety system remains one of the best in the world. We take the trust Canadians have put in us to protect the safety of Canada's food supply extremely seriously.

Canadian consumers are always our government's first priority when it comes to food safety. We will continue to make sure that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has the resources it needs to do its important job of protecting Canadians and their families. Canadian consumers are, and will continue to be, our first priority.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak with respect to this issue. It is one that has been extremely important to those members and my constituents in Simcoe—Grey.

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● (2200)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before I start, I just want to wish a happy birthday to my daughter, Mindy. This is where we are at times during those special occasions.

Hearing the speeches tonight, and now this speech from the other side, and talking about zero credibility when it comes to food safety, I have to remind the member that it was under her government that we saw the biggest recall in Canadian history with respect to beef. That is a food safety problem under its watch.

When I was on one of her committees, whatever we heard from the government was in a time of fiscal restraint. Well, in a time of fiscal restraint, the Conservatives are talking about having created all these jobs, but what they are not telling us is that 200 of the inspectors they are talking about were for an invasive alien species program. In actuality, very few meat inspectors were added.

Could the member confirm or deny that in the spring the CFIA will lose 308 positions, many of which are food inspectors, at a time when we find ourselves in a crisis?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, I too wish Mindy a happy birthday. Unfortunately, her mother is here to ask me questions at this late hour. I wish she was at home with her daughter, but I wish her a happy birthday as well.

I think it has been said several times throughout the evening here that the first priority of our government is the safety of Canadians. That means that we have been focused and investing and making sure that food safety is a top priority for us. We have invested in having over 700 food inspectors, including 170 meat inspectors, over the last five to six years. We have also made sure that there are additional investments. In fact, in budget 2011, there was \$100 million over the course of five years.

The beef producers in my riding of Simcoe—Grey are actually quite concerned about this debate. The level of fearmongering and the concerns being put forward by the opposition are really causing challenges for them with respect to how they need to deal with the beef industry.

What I ask of the opposition is to stick to the facts. The facts are that we have increased the number of food inspectors that are available. I would really like them to stop the fearmongering.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member spoke about her expertise as a physician. She also said that she was placing the facts on the table. I want to ask her about those facts and about her expertise as a physician.

We heard a wonderful lecture about public health and epidemiology. That is not helping the people who are now ill. The hon. member should know that as a physician, she is judged on the outcomes, not on what she hopes to do, not on what she knows in her head, but on the outcomes of her patients' health. People are sick. That is a poor outcome for something that was said to be so wonderful. People do not get sick if the job is done right.

Second, the hon. member told us that washing one's hands was important for people to know about. Is the hon. member telling me that if people had washed their hands, they would not have gotten E.

coli from the beef? What a ludicrous suggestion from anybody who knows anything about science.

Third, there is a protocol. There is clear legislative authority. The minute a food-borne illness affects humans, and the minute it crosses one provincial boundary or international border, the Public Health Agency and the Minister of Health have to get involved. They have not. They have done no surveillance. They have done absolutely nothing until yesterday. Why?

● (2205)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, let us be very clear. This government has been focused on making sure that the safety of Canadians has been put first and foremost. That is why we have provided opportunities for there to be additional inspectors. That is why we provided additional funds.

I will take issue with one thing. One of the most important things in making sure that Canadians are healthy is actually handwashing. We need to basically make sure that Canadians are well educated with regard to this file. The concept that the member opposite would laugh at this opportunity to provide a really basic public health opportunity I find rather outlandish.

To go back to the point, let us be very clear. This government has invested significantly in making sure that individuals are trained and able to do the inspections they need to do, and it has invested in making sure that there are 700 new inspectors.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to make a comment and ask my hon. colleague from Simcoe—Grey if she is aware that the member for Burnaby—New Westminster indicated that there were no new inspectors at the XL facility. In fact, there were six new inspectors and two additional veterinarians.

I am wondering if my hon. colleague can confirm for me that as part of our investments in making sure of food safety, CFIA has the resources and the funds it needs to carry out inspections.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, I would like to express my sympathies to those constituents from my colleague's riding who are suffering at this time.

The most important thing to outline is exactly what the member had said, which is that there are certain facts. The facts are that since 2006, two veterinarians and six inspectors have been added to the plant complement at this site. There actually has been an increase of 711, from 2,823 to 3,534 inspectors in March of 2012. That is almost a 25% increase. These numbers are the facts.

I would encourage the members opposite to understand that this government is focused on making sure that food safety for this country is being attended to. I wonder why the members opposite continue to fearmonger and to raise concerns among the Canadian public.

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Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I know the parliamentary secretary understands things like reports of the plans and priorities committee because she is a parliamentary secretary.

Therefore, I draw her attention to a fact. Signed and tabled on May 8 by the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the plan was to spend \$46.6 million less and take 314 full-time equivalences out of CFIA. Does that fact mean things are going down, or does the parliamentary secretary think that was an increase?

To help the parliamentary secretary with her speaking points, she should write out the line that we oppose Bill S-11. I have said for the third time, and others have said as well, that we will support it, in principle, at second reading. However, we have great suggestions and we are hopeful. The member opposite has said that we should all tone down the rhetoric and take a breath. We are all taking a breath. We want to help her make good legislation to ensure the food safety system is safe for all Canadians. I hope the Conservatives actually hear that.

Could she speak to the decline of \$46 million and 314 positions, which is a fact because her minister signed it? Does that mean it is declining or does it mean something that I do not understand?

● (2210)

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure how many times I need to say this because I have now said it three times this evening. We have increased the number of inspectors to over 700 individuals. I am happy to say that.

The most important thing to say with respect to this issue is this. We recognize that Canadian food safety is the number one priority for this government because it is so important to Canadians. I encourage the opposition to support Bill S-11, very important legislation, with no caveats. Please help us move this legislation forward so we can ensure Canadians are protected.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Newton—North Delta.

This is a major crisis we are going through. The facts are clear. This is the largest meat recall in Canadian history, affecting more than 1,500 products across the country, and that is not insignificant.

A number of things concern me about the safety of our food, in this case in particular. First, it was the Americans who first discovered the E. coli bacteria in the meat, before our Canadian inspectors did.

I know that the Conservatives, including the Minister of Agriculture, said today in Calgary that there were just a few hours between the time when the U.S. inspectors sounded the alarm and the time when Canadian Food Inspection Agency inspectors did, but the fact remains that the Americans were first.

If memory serves me correctly, this is the second major crisis discovered by the Americans. The same thing happened when the Sandoz drug manufacturing plant closed in January. I am not questioning the competence or dedication of the officials. I am questioning the reliability of the system in which they are working.

Canadians have to have trust in their government inspection systems, but in this case they have reason to doubt. We must restore their confidence. Unfortunately, the way the Conservatives are managing the current crisis is doing nothing to reassure the public. It took far too long for the products to be recalled and the abattoir to be closed after the E. coli bacteria was discovered.

The statements by the Minister of Agriculture, who initially said no tainted products made their way to grocery store shelves and then had to issue a recall, do nothing to inspire confidence, especially when we see the list of recalled products getting longer every day.

The worst thing in all this is that the health of Canadians was put in jeopardy by the government's inaction. The E. coli bacteria is not innocuous. Most of the people infected will show no symptoms; others will have relatively minor, but very unpleasant stomach ailments, such as cramps, diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, headaches and fever.

Symptoms can appear within 5 to 10 days following contamination, and infected people can also pass on the bacteria to their loved ones. The number of people affected is therefore likely to increase beyond the five confirmed and 23 suspected cases. In the most serious cases, the E. coli bacteria can cause life-threatening symptoms, including kidney failure, epileptic seizures and stroke.

In some cases, fortunately a small number of cases, the bacteria can cause permanent damage such as kidney damage, especially among high-risk groups, which include pregnant women, people with compromised immune systems, young children and seniors. I was very upset to learn that a young boy is suffering from kidney failure.

The second thing that concerns me is the rhetoric being spewed by the members opposite regarding food inspection. I know my colleagues opposite received the same emails that I did. I received hundreds of emails from the people of my riding expressing their concerns about the cuts to food inspection and the changes made regarding labelling. Considering the crisis we are now facing, they are right to be worried.

And yet how many times—today alone—have we heard the Conservatives say that food safety is important to this government and to Canadians, or that our food inspection system is one of the best in the world?

● (2215)

If our system is so good and if food safety is a priority, why was the Canadian Food Inspection Agency not spared from the budget cuts? Why did the government cut more than \$46 million and why were more than 300 positions eliminated? Why will funding for the food safety program be reduced from \$355 million in 2011-12 to \$337 million in 2014-15? Are we aiming for a middle-of-the-road food safety system? Canadians deserve better. They deserve the best system.

These cuts are even more surprising when we consider that, according to the Public Service Alliance, the minister was apparently warned in January 2009 in a briefing note from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency that the inspection program could not handle the workload and meet delivery requirements. I do not understand why the minister is now reducing the number of inspectors.

When it comes to food safety, there should be no compromising because Canadians' health is at stake. The Conservatives have been telling us for months that cuts to the public service will not affect Canadians. We know that this is not the case. Cuts of more than \$46 million and the elimination of more than 300 positions, including 100 CFIA inspectors, will have consequences. I could say the same thing about the \$5 billion in cuts and the 19,000 jobs lost in the public service.

There is something wrong with the system, and we have the right to answers from the Minister of Agriculture. The fact that American authorities were the first to discover the contamination is disturbing. But there is nothing more disturbing than learning that, despite the positive test results on September 4 and 5, the public was not notified until September 16. That is quite simply unacceptable because Canadians' health was put at risk. We need to know what went wrong and ensure that it does not happen again.

[English]

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to correct some facts, and I want to ask the hon. member if she agrees with me.

The member for Simcoe—Grey said in her speech that the government had undertaken the execution of all the recommendations of the Weatherill report, when in fact we know the opposite to be true.

One of the recommendations, among the others that were not fulfilled, was the requirement for a comprehensive audit of all CFIA resources, including human resources. We know now, based on a comment from the former president of the CFIA, Carole Swan, that what in fact occurred was only a review and, in her own words, “They didn’t conduct it as an audit. An audit is a very specific process. It was a detailed review”. That is my first point.

My second comment is with respect to her proposition that the Bill S-11 is the panacea for food safety, when in fact we know that right now under the Meat Inspection Act, the CFIA has the authority to demand shipping bills, bills of lading and documents on record. This was announced again in February of this year in a government announcement reminding inspectors that it had the authority to demand any record, sample or document whatsoever and reminding the industry that it was required to provide this information.

Does the member agree with me that the member from Simcoe—Grey is in fact in error, that Bill S-11 is not a panacea for food safety and that all the recommendations of the Weatherill report have not been completed?

• (2220)

[Translation]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. opposition colleague for those relevant questions. This is par for the course. I am just as surprised as he is by this government's behaviour.

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Regarding inspection, I have a document here that indicates that resources for meat inspection are overextended. It is important to be logical when it comes to inspection. Now the government is allowing companies to do their own inspections. Where is the logic in that? The purpose of inspection is to report what is wrong and what poses a danger to Canadian consumers.

The current inspection system needs to be reviewed and entrusted to an organization that is independent of the producer or plant. Resources for inspection also need to be increased, especially for meat inspection, since that area seems to have suffered budget cuts. The CFIA agrees.

[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 want to start by correcting the member for Guelph that we have implemented all 57 recommendations from the Weatherill report. No matter how many times he says otherwise, we have.

My question is for the member who just finished speaking. One of the things I mentioned tonight was that Canada was one of the best performing countries in 2010 for food safety performance, as the world ranking studies have indicated in OECD reports. We have invested substantially, with over 700 new food inspectors, including 170 meat inspectors.

People in my riding, including beef farmers, have asked us to tone down the rhetoric so that we can actually focus on what the facts are and make sure that Canadian consumers and food safety are our focus and that food is safe for Canadians.

I ask the members opposite, do they plan on toning down the rhetoric and the fearmongering, which are of concern to my residents in Simcoe—Grey?

[Translation]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague opposite for the question. I would remind the member that the NDP is not talking about numbers and figures, but rather about facts. I know that our system is one of the best, but it can be even better. The government needs to do better.

If our system is one of the best, then why are we facing the current crisis?

[English]

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as a mother and grandmother, my heart goes out to the families who have been impacted by the tainted meat and E. coli breakout. I cannot imagine how those families must be feeling right now. I know that the same kind of angst, pain and fear they are feeling as a result of their family members being sick is shared by other Canadians, who are wondering if they ate meat from that particular plant and if they should dare buy beef today.

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As Christine Lee said when she was interviewed by the CBC, she became very concerned. Indeed, the hospital confirmed to her on September 16 that her son Elijah had E. coli, but it was not until September 26 that a health warning was issued for steaks bought at a northeast Edmonton Costco supplied by the XL Foods facility in Brooks, Alberta. This information is pulled from the CBC article.

I find it unfathomable that any member of Parliament sitting in the House today or at any time could talk about fearmongering when we are actually dealing with the biggest meat recall in our history. We are talking about Canadian families whose loved ones are ill. We are trying to express tonight in this debate a great deal of concern and a call for immediate action. That is what we are looking for, not long-term bills about what we are going to do three to five years down the road, but what went wrong, why and what other steps will be taken to address this issue.

As a teacher, I talked for years about the importance of washing hands to prevent kids from getting colds or the flu. Whenever I fly, I always try to make sure that when I cough or sneeze, I do it the new way by coughing or sneezing into my elbow. Let us be honest that to hear a member of Parliament talking about the need to wash hands in this context makes one wonder if she is thinking that the workers at the plant failed to wash their hands and that is why there is an E. coli outbreak, or if she is saying that when we all wash our hands the E. coli will not affect us. I was left sitting here shaking my head at those kinds of statements being made in the House when the same member of Parliament talks at the same time about fearmongering. The fact that we have the largest recall of beef in our history is causing enough fear.

We are hoping that after tonight's debate the government will take immediate action to assure people that things are in hand. Instead, the agriculture minister is missing in action. I would like to ask him some very direct questions and I am sure I will get the opportunity to do that.

The member's comments about washing hands also bring to mind that we have an agriculture minister who, when making a speech at a dinner, made a lighthearted joke. One could say that he was just trying to lighten the mood because there must have been some tension at that dinner where beef was being served. It was very inappropriate for any minister to make those kinds of comments, saying he was eating beef and that because he was okay, everyone else must be okay too. That is just not acceptable.

• (2225)

I can say one thing: We as Canadians cannot accept E. coli in our food system and allow even one more person to get sick. Maybe I was living in a bit of a naive place, but I always believed that our food inspection was far superior to that of the Americans. I really believed that. However, what has come to light is that the Americans were on top of this E. coli outbreak long before we were. Now I am beginning to worry about the safety of our other foods and the kind of inspections we have.

The current government is very fond of talking about cutting red tape. If cutting red tape means not having enough inspectors to inspect food, hygiene and food health, and we now have to rely on companies to do their own inspection, I can assure members that

Canadians do not want that kind of red tape reduction. That is not red tape but a matter of life and death.

We take this very seriously on this side of the House. We do not joke about it. We do not think this is fearmongering. This is a serious and grave concern and one that every parliamentarian should be engaged in and looking to find solutions for, instead of their trying to blame the opposition.

I keep hearing about the NDP apparently not going to support the bill, and yet I have heard our critic say over and over again, the bill has deficiencies but we in the NDP are going to help make it better and will support it being taken to report stage.

However, let us look at some of the policies of the government that could actually have contributed to the very unfortunate disaster that we have upon us.

One of the problems is that the Brooks plant in Alberta has very high staff turnover. When there is a very high staff turnover, things fall through the cracks.

I also learned that a very large number of workers at this particular plant are temporary foreign workers and that they are not on the road to citizenship. We really need these workers in Alberta. It is not as if we do not need meat and do not have an ongoing cattle industry. Yet because of the government's policies, we still bring these people in as temporary foreign workers. They do their short stint, work hard, and probably work for less money than other workers would be willing to do. We are not sure if they get the training.

Here I have some very serious questions. I wish the minister were here to answer them. I want to know what kind of training those temporary foreign workers are given before they work in these plants. I ask because we are talking about the life, safety and security of Canadians. I hear over and over again from the government side how the security of Canadians, the security of Canada, is its number one priority. If that is our number one priority, then I want to know what steps are taken to address that when new workers arrive. Remember that these workers come in and then leave. They come in and then we send them back. I want to know what kind of training they are given. I want to know what kind of health and safety inspections exist.

I also want to point out that there must be a certain amount of fear on the part of temporary foreign workers as to what they can report, because they must be worried about what that would mean, particularly as are brought here to work on a very temporary basis but are not considered good enough to live here. They know they will be sent back and replaced by a few hundred other workers who will fill their vacated positions.

I want to go back to the need for everyone to tone down the rhetoric and to look at what went wrong and implement solutions immediately so that Canadians can feel secure.

• (2230)

Those solutions will not be through cutting red tape, but through making sure the resources are there for appropriate food inspection. I am not prepared to accept food inspection at a lower level than that of our neighbours, the United States.

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Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to the member's remarks. She talked about the fearmongering coming from the other side. What kind of crisis would it take for the government's spokesmen, and we have two parliamentary secretaries here tonight, to move away from their talking points, accept responsibility and lay out a plan that will give some assurances to Canadians, shore up cattle prices, and restore our international reputation?

This debate is not about fearmongering or partisanship on our side. It is about holding the government accountable and responsible. There is an emergency. People are afraid of food. Beef prices are falling. Our international reputation is in tatters. Is that not what the debate is about, not what the government claims is fearmongering?

• (2235)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, I agree with my colleague that this debate is about the role the opposition plays in holding the government accountable and asking questions on behalf of Canadians, such as what went wrong and how it will be addressed. However, all we hear from the other side are platitudes, that there are more inspectors than ever. We know that in the next three years the budget is projected to be cut by \$56.1 million and we have not heard any real answers. Instead, we heard a lot about washing hands and not taking responsibility.

I want to hear from the Minister of Agriculture. At the end of the day he is accountable. He is responsible. He has to stand in the House and answer questions from the opposition. He cannot run away from answering those questions.

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we need to come back to the point of whether the opposition supports fortifying and reinforcing our food safety system.

I come back to the 700 net new inspectors. I come back to budget elements that increase the financial resources for the CFIA to do its job. It is on record that the opposition members, the New Democrats in particular, voted against these measures. I have a hard time standing here listening to them say they support food safety when at every opportunity they vote against providing more inspectors and against providing more financial capacity to the CFIA. They have to account to Canadians for this.

I ask my colleague to stand up and explain to Canadians the NDP's refusal to support the CFIA.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, the government presented a budget that was thicker than the phone book for most Canadian cities and then expected to apply one vote to that whole budget. It would take me a whole day to list what I would not support in that budget.

No NDP member has ever stood in the House and said that we are against the Conservative government implementing food safety for our citizens.

It is truly disingenuous to keep making these wild accusations instead of dealing with the biggest food recall. There are people who are sick. It impacts our cattle farmers and ranchers. It also affects families. My grandchildren love beef; they are carnivores. I can tell

you, they are scared. They are still at school, but they are scared when they hear the news reports.

Let us try to address that instead of talking about a budget bill that was the size of a phone book and had more holes in it than I could list today.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I remind hon. members to direct their comments through the chair.

Resuming debate. The hon. member for Prince George—Peace River.

Mr. Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in this debate.

Let me remind my colleagues in the opposition of some of the facts that they choose to ignore.

Fact: as government, we have hired over 700 food inspectors since 2006, including 170 meat inspectors. Fact: our government has implemented all 57 recommendations from the Weatherill report. Fact: if the opposition believes that the powers of the agency are not sufficient, it should support our government's legislation to make sure that the CFIA has greater authorities. It needs to support our safe food for Canadians act. Fact: we increased the CFIA's budget by \$156 million, \$744 million in total budget, which is a 20% increase. Fact: the XL plant will not be allowed to reopen until the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has certified that it is safe.

It is too bad the opposition does not want to listen to these facts.

Again, no safety system goes unchallenged; that is why it is there. It is how it responds to challenges that shows how well it works. We can see this in the chain of events that began on September 4. Let us look at the timeline.

On September 4, during routine testing, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, CFIA, identified a positive E. coli 0157:H7 sample in raw beef trimmings produced at an Alberta facility supplied by XL Foods Inc. Plant management and the CFIA veterinarian in charge at XL Foods Inc. were notified of this finding. The problem was picked up by U.S. officials the same day as the CFIA was dealing with it.

The first step for the CFIA was to ensure that the contaminated product had not reached consumers in Canada. There was no delay. The agency determined it had not reached the Canadian marketplace, which is why there was no product recall at that time.

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The CFIA immediately began an investigation to determine the source of the contamination. This included enhanced on-site inspection activities, including additional oversight of daily testing to ensure that public health and food safety were not compromised. CFIA officials report their initial investigation found no obvious indication that other products at the plant posed any risk, but they did not stop there. They dug deeper.

On September 6, they requested distribution information and testing results for all products produced on August 24 and August 28, the days when the affected products were made.

On September 7, the agency issued a corrective action request to XL Foods requiring it to strengthen controls around sampling and testing of meat products originating from the Brooks plant. The agency again also requested XL Foods to produce detailed information related to product details, distribution, sampling results and information on the effectiveness of the plant's preventive controls no later than September 10. Their additional analysis, plus more information from the company, revealed shortcomings in the company's procedures that warranted further investigation.

On September 12, the CFIA sent a technical review team into the plant to help on-site staff conduct an in-depth review of operations and assess how and where contamination had occurred.

On September 13, the CFIA removed XL Foods Inc. from the list of establishments eligible to export to the U.S., but with no evidence that any contaminated product discovered in the initial test had reached Canadian consumers, there was again no product recall.

The technical review team determined there was no single factor that would lead to *E. coli* contamination of products leaving the XL Foods plant. Rather, the team concluded that a combination of deficiencies may have contributed to the contamination.

Based on these findings, XL Foods began to advise customers that it was recalling beef trimmings for August 24, 28 and September 5.

On September 16, the CFIA and XL Foods began issuing health hazard alerts. They warned the public, distributors, grocery chains and food service establishments not to consume, sell or serve specific ground beef products made from XL Foods beef trimmings from August 24, 28 and September 5. The recall has since expanded to include a variety of XL Foods meat products.

From its ongoing data review, the CFIA identified two additional production dates, August 27 and 29, with higher risks for *E. coli* contamination. As a result, XL Foods began notifying its customers in Canada and the U.S. that it was recalling beef trimmings produced on August 27 and 29.

• (2240)

On September 22, the CFIA issued a new health hazard alert identifying products related to two additional days.

By September 26, it was clear to the CFIA that the Brooks XL Foods plant had not completely corrected its deficiencies. The plant's licence was temporarily suspended and all products were held for testing.

One thing that must be made crystal clear is that XL Foods will not resume operations until the company has demonstrated to the

CFIA's complete satisfaction that it has fully implemented the required corrective actions. The resumption of operations, when it occurs, will include additional requirements in terms of test and hold procedures on an ongoing basis. The CFIA wants to be certain that once it has reviewed and approved the plant's control plans, those plans will deliver safe products to Canadians.

As we review this timeline, we see a rapid methodical scientific response to a complex problem. Attention has focused on the time between the initial detection of *E. coli*, the recalls and the plant shutdown. In fact, the agency was fully committed to investigating the source of contamination and preventing contaminated products from reaching consumers.

If we look at how these events unfolded, we see a food safety system responding to a serious challenge as it should, responsibly and effectively. There is no foundation to the suggestion that there were too few inspectors at the plant as a result of budget cutbacks. The CFIA has confirmed the plant has 46 full-time staff, including 40 inspection staff and six veterinarians, who provide daily inspections in the plant for its two shifts. That is certainly not a reduction. Far from reductions, the number of CFIA staff at this XL Foods plant has increased by six during the last several years.

That is not to say there is nothing to learn from this event, and I am sure the CFIA, the meat-packing industry, consumers and all the food safety partners involved will adopt any lessons they have learned.

I remind my colleagues that our government introduced the safe food for Canadians act last June to protect Canadian families from potentially unsafe food. Those concerned about food safety should give this bill their support when it comes to the House.

For example, the bill would allow the CFIA to create a requirement for the food industry to have traceability systems. We can see how important it is to trace products from farm to fork, and in the event of an incident like this one, to do it quickly. The proposed regulation-making authority would help the agency in its efforts to quickly remove recalled products from the marketplace. The regulation under the bill would also ensure that the company provides documentation in a form that can be easily and quickly assessed without the need for the company to interpret. No one gets excited about streamlining bureaucratic procedures, but when lives are on the line, we see the point.

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I look forward to seeing the proposed safe food for Canadians bill move swiftly through this House and into law so Canadians will have the benefit of an even more effective food safety system. I support this proposed legislation because it is time that Canadians felt more protected when they shop for food and sit down at their dinner tables to eat it. It is time to modernize and for Canadians to have comprehensive protection from unsafe food under one single piece of legislation. We have one of the strongest food safety systems in the world. This legislation would further enhance this system.

However, consumer expectations for stronger food safety systems are higher than ever. These expectations have evolved following such food safety incidents as melamine contamination of imported dairy products from abroad and outbreaks of food poisoning from domestically produced food products. Enacting this food safety legislation would allow us to do a recommendation of the report by Sheila Weatherill, the report of the independent investigator into the 2008 listeriosis outbreak. The recommendation is to modernize and simplify food safety legislation. Our government has committed itself to addressing all 57 of the independent investigator's recommendations.

The parliamentary subcommittee on food safety, with representation of both government and the opposition, voiced unanimous support to act on all the recommendations of that report. I urge this House to make good on that pledge by supporting this bill when it comes to us.

The current roles and responsibilities of the Minister of Health and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food would not change as a result of this legislation. Health Canada would still set policy and standards for food safety and nutritional quality. Health Canada would remain responsible for natural health products, which are not subject to this proposed legislation. The CFIA would still be responsible for enforcing food safety standards.

● (2245)

Here is why the legislation is so important. Currently regulations managed by the CFIA are governed by 13 different pieces of legislation. All of these acts were made into law over the past 50 years or more, and the requirements under these acts related to food sometimes vary. Over the past decades, new safety risks have emerged due to advancing science and technology, globalization and innovation. The world is changing and the food safety environment is becoming more and more complex. Canada's legislative framework needs to be modernized to reflect these changes.

Canada's legislation must also keep pace with its trading partners. We need to evolve our legislative base for food safety so that we can continue to protect Canadians from unsafe food and prevent Canadian food exports from being shut out of international markets.

Trade in food is on the rise. Demographics are changing. Consumer demand and expectations of governments are changing, and technology too. Canada's current approach of five different food safety acts leads to a cumbersome application of food safety regulations. We agree it needs to be changed.

We have one set of rules for meat and quite another for fish. That just does not make sense. The principles of how to produce safe food

are not commodity specific. Regulated parties should not have to work from different rule books and, for that matter, neither should federal inspectors.

If the opposition members believe that the powers of the agency are not sufficient, they should support our government's legislation to make sure that CFIA has greater authorities. Canada's system is one of the best in the world and while we do have a strong food safety system, we can and should improve on the current authorities available to the government. This will better position us to face current and future risks and challenges.

In terms of exactly what the proposed legislation will do, there are two key outcomes: safer food and better protection for Canadians, and a more competitive environment for Canadian businesses involved in the food industry.

In terms of safer food, the legislation will provide stronger border measures, better protection from tampering and hoaxes, and higher fines for bad actors and unsafe practitioners in the food business. Indeed, speaking about our legislation, Nancy Croitoru, president and CEO of Food and Consumer Products of Canada, said:

[We] strongly support and applaud the federal government's strong action to modernize Canada's food safety laws.

That says it all. I want my colleagues in the opposition to heed these words and finally tell Canadians that they do indeed support safe food for Canadians.

● (2250)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to begin by expressing my most sincere sympathies to the families affected by this disaster that we all lament.

I feel like I must be dreaming. Someone, wake me up. This is an emergency situation, we are having an emergency debate and the secretary of state is teaching us a lesson on prevention. We are all for prevention and we think prevention is just great, but now is not the time to talk about it when we are in the middle of a disaster. The hon. member is treating us to a look back at everything they have done so far and everything they might do through the introduction of bills.

This is an emergency situation. The house is on fire. Now is not the time to talk about the five fire trucks and 120 firefighters who are going to put out the fire. It is time to act. This is bad for the economy. It is bad for public health.

What is the government going to do tomorrow, or even tonight, to deal with this crisis?

[*English*]

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Speaker, I talked about what our system actually does in my speech.

I think it is easy to criticize the system, but the system is doing exactly what it is supposed to do. It spotted the outbreak, it caught it, and it did what it was supposed to do. That is all I can say.

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The fact of the matter is that we have actually increased inspectors, as members know. We have increased the funding to CFIA as well. At the plant in question, there are 46 full-time staff: 40 inspection staff and 6 veterinarians. That is a net increase over what it was a few years ago.

That is the fact of the matter. Obviously we are concerned and we want to see things fixed as soon as possible for Canadians and for our international purchasers. We will continue to do that.

We look forward to the opposition supporting our legislation.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am sorry to say that the member for Prince George—Peace River is asking us to accept as fact what is actually fallacy and fiction.

Following the Weatherill report, the former president of the CFIA, Carole Swan, said that PricewaterhouseCoopers was brought in to review CFIA's functioning. The Conservatives speak of all of the Weatherill recommendations being followed, but the fact is that PricewaterhouseCoopers was not hired by Agriculture Canada to do a full comprehensive resource audit, which was requested. They were only asked to deliver a review. Therefore, the full comprehensive resource audit of CFIA, including human resources, has not been done.

It is a fact that the Meat Inspection Act already gives the CFIA the authority to demand all they need in order to protect Canadians and promote food safety. That was repeated in government guidelines issued in February of this year, letting the inspectors know that they had that authority and the processors know that they had to assist and honour any requests.

Finally, the fact is that there were 170 new meat inspectors, not 700. They were all directed to the ready-to-eat meat plants, such as those at Maple Leaf Foods, and none to XL Foods.

Those are three facts. Those are three things that this member would have us think otherwise.

● (2255)

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Speaker, all I can say is that challenges on our facts coming from that member is a stretch. I think the House would agree to that. We know who is guilty and that is all I will say.

I will reiterate what our government has done. CFIA has had a net increase of inspectors, bottom line. I am on the agriculture committee and I see this. The fact is that the government has hired over 700 food inspectors since 2006, including 170 meat inspectors. There has been a net increase of inspectors at XL Foods. The facts speak for themselves.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. friend for Prince George—Peace River.

There has been a tremendous amount of confusion tonight between various parties claiming for themselves different facts. I have gone through budget 2012 and tried to figure it out.

There was the suggestion by the parliamentary secretary that there was \$100 million in new funding to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, but she referred to the 2011 budget. I have the 2012 budget, which clearly shows that the funding for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is to go down year on year to a \$56 million

decline, holding steady by 2014. Again, the money that went up was to three different agencies for a two-year period: \$52 million over two years split three ways. Potentially it was as much as \$8 million to CFIA, while that agency's funding is going down steadily.

I want to put this to my friend. The Weatherill report made a couple of observations that seem not to have been acted on. One of them is found on page iv of the Weatherill report, and this is referring to listeriosis. It says there was a “lack of a sense of urgency at the outset of the outbreak”.

I think we are seeing that again. We are seeing misinformation and delays. The reality of the current crisis is that we do not seem to have learned from the last one.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Speaker, again, speaking about the concerns for the Canadian public and the concerns about inspection, on this side of the House, we want to reassure Canadians that the inspection agency has caught the outbreak.

We are dealing with it as we speak and responding to it as it needs to be responded to. This is why the agency exists. It is to do this very thing and catch these potential outbreaks as they enter the market. It has done what it is supposed to do. Unfortunately, it happened. Of course, we wish it would not have happened.

To speak to the member's question, I think you just added further confusion for all the people who are watching tonight. I do not think she made it any clearer. Again, I will speak to the fact that we have added 700 food inspectors since 2006. It is pretty simple. It includes 170 meat inspectors. At XL Foods there has been an increase of inspection staff there.

In essence, CFIA did catch it. It is still there and, again, we wish this did not happen. However, the CFIA has done its job and caught it. I think CFIA is doing what it is supposed to do.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I would remind the hon. members to direct their comments through the Chair.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Wetaskiwin.

● (2300)

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first of all I would like to start by thanking all hon. members who are present for tonight's debate. This is obviously a very serious issue and in my line of questioning I am not going to downplay the seriousness of this issue. I have the privilege of representing the great people who live in the constituency of Wetaskiwin, a rural area between Red Deer and Edmonton. I grew up on a beef farm, a cow-calf operation. I understand full well the consequences of the BSE crisis that happened in 2003 and the various droughts that have happened throughout my lifetime growing up on a farm.

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I am not trying to minimize in any way the very serious question of food safety in our country. I would like to say to my colleague across the way, who also represents a great part of our country and represents a lot of producers, that if this is overplayed too much in the public theatre, the rhetoric coming out of this actually has a detrimental effect over the long term on not only the safety of our food system but also the viability of our beef industry. I wonder if he has any comments or concerns about how this is being played out.

Mr. Bob Zimmer: Mr. Speaker, absolutely, the thing that seems most disingenuous to me is that members who serve with me on the agriculture committee stand in the House and purport to support the cattle and beef industry. I have good friends on that side. They are hard-working people who raise cattle and who work hard for what they have. To see this hot potato issue politicized in the House is not really serving anyone very well.

CFIA is doing its job. It caught the outbreak. Let CFIA do its job and leave the farmers alone.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to say that I am going to share my time with the hon. member for Burnaby—Douglas.

We are here to discuss a major issue. My thoughts are with the families affected by the tainted meat. That is why we are here tonight. We have heard a lot of background and many facts. What I would like to do tonight is get to the bottom of this, to get to the real heart of the problem. The heart of the problem comes down to two things: the Conservative government's lack of accountability and transparency, which resulted in the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board's refusal to assume his ministerial responsibility, among other things. There is also the matter of the cuts and the impact that the Conservative government's decisions have had on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Let us look back to April 2012. Hon. members will no doubt remember the budget, which was Bill C-38 at the time. The Conservative budget had a number of impacts. First, many public service jobs were eliminated, including—and this was announced in the media—the 825 employees who received a letter in April 2012 informing them that their job was in danger. Of these 825 people, 59 inspectors—people on the ground to investigate and to check the meat, among other things—received a letter confirming that their position had been eliminated. Approximately 40 other inspectors were expected to receive the same message as a result of the Conservative cuts.

A reporter from Postmedia News, Sarah Schmidt, asked the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board and the department a number of times to specify which positions would be affected by the cuts. She wanted to know whether veterinarians, people responsible for examining seed and inspectors would be affected. She repeatedly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board these questions but never received an answer.

We could probably talk about the Parliamentary Budget Officer's repeated requests for details about the cuts announced by the Conservative government. The Conservatives refused to provide this

information, despite the Accountability Act, which should force them to do it.

For a government that has made accountability and transparency its bread-and-butter issue since 2006, that is unacceptable and irresponsible.

What should we make of these 700 new inspectors mentioned time and again by each of the members who spoke this evening and, I would note, who repeated almost the same speech practically word for word. Once again, there are no details about these 700 new inspectors.

A Canadian Press journalist contacted the minister and the Department of Agriculture to obtain additional information, namely what kind of positions were included in these 700 new jobs. These are not 700 inspector jobs, and the Conservative government is deliberately trying to confuse the issue.

The Agriculture Union and the Public Service Alliance of Canada tried to find out the assignments for these 700 new inspectors. They did not get an answer. They managed to come up with an estimate. Of the 700 inspectors, 200 were assigned to monitor imports of invasive alien species, 330 were assigned to technical categories, such as seed examination, and 170 positions were inspectors assigned to processing plants, not slaughter houses.

The case of tainted meat that we are debating this evening occurred in a slaughter house and not in a processing plant.

● (2305)

That is an important distinction to make. Every single Conservative member who has spoken tonight has refused to address this issue and tried once again to confuse the matter.

In budget 2012, the government reduced the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's budget by \$56 million. It is in budget 2012 in black and white. The government boasted about having invested \$51 million in the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and said that there would be no budget cuts, that everything would be fine.

That \$56 million represents real cuts. The \$51 million, as the member for Saanich—Gulf Islands pointed out, was distributed among three agencies: the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, the Public Health Agency of Canada and Health Canada. This \$51 million was invested to renew existing food safety programs. These were not new investments. This money went to maintain an existing program, which was created after the listeriosis crisis that hit the country not too long ago, so that it could continue focusing on food safety. So this was not new money. It went towards an existing program. However, the \$56 million was cut directly from the agency's funding.

This crisis could end up being a crisis of trust. The Conservatives are accusing us of fearmongering with this issue. We are not fearmongering. It is our role as official opposition to hold the government accountable for its decisions. The budget cuts to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency will have a significant impact.

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What happened at XL Foods is the tip of the iceberg of what might happen if the government refuses to take responsibility, if the minister refuses to assume ministerial responsibility, which is absolutely essential in our parliamentary system, if the Conservatives continue to deny their responsibility in the budget cuts and to provide misleading information on the true state of things when it comes to meat inspections.

Repeating left and right that they added 700 new inspectors is not helping. No inspector was sent to XL Foods. What is more, one of the most problematic things about XL Foods is that there was a shortage of inspectors on the floor of the abattoir for a very long time. The union sounded the alarm many times about this. New positions may have been created, but not many. The Conservatives are talking about two or six inspectors, depending on who is talking. Those inspectors are filling existing positions that had become vacant. No new investment had been made for XL Foods.

The hon. member for Welland, our agriculture critic, was very clear about this. We are talking about a plant that sped up its processing line. It slaughters 4,000 to 5,000 head of cattle. There are 46 inspectors there, but they work two shifts. Twenty-three inspectors work one shift and the 23 other inspectors work the other shift, at a plant the size of several city blocks. It is a very large plant. Having 23 people on site at all times is just not enough, and XL Foods employees have to pick up the slack. It is absolutely irresponsible of the Conservatives to deny this fact and to try to hide it behind various figures.

I know there are Canadians still watching us this evening. It may be 11:10 p.m. here, but it is 8:10 p.m. in British Columbia and 9:10 p.m. in Alberta.

• (2310)

For the people watching us at home, whether in western Canada, the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec or the Atlantic provinces, I simply wanted to point out that this is the government they are stuck with at the moment. The comments they have heard this evening demonstrate that this government is happy to throw around half-truths. They have a government that cares only about covering its butt when facing a crisis. They have a government that refuses to accept responsibility. Above all, they have a minister who refuses to accept his primary responsibility, his ministerial responsibility, whereby he should be assuming full responsibility for a tragedy like the one we are facing.

This government's first instinct when faced with a crisis like this one is to blame everyone else apart from the Conservative Party or the Conservative caucus, whether it be the Canadian Food Inspection Agency or the opposition parties. Quebec and Canada deserve better than that. As the official opposition, we have a duty to demand that the government be accountable and remain transparent, which it refused to do in all of the cases we have dealt with here, cases for which the Parliamentary Budget Officer is asking to see the specific data regarding the cuts to be made by the Conservatives. They refuse to provide that information.

It is the government's duty to accept responsibility for what happens, to stop hiding behind numbers, to stop spreading misinformation and, ultimately, to act for the health and well-being

of all Canadians. Based on what I have heard here this evening, the government is still refusing to do so.

[*English*]

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member spoke of the half-truths from the government. I am wondering if he could address two of these half-truths. The first is that they have completely implemented the recommendations of the Weatherill report, when we know, based on statements by Carole Swan, the former president of the CFIA, that the CFIA had not conducted a full or comprehensive audit of all of its resources, including human resources. In fact, she tells us that what did occur was only a detailed review conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, which is not a full audit.

The second is that apparently Bill S-11 will be the panacea for food safety, when in fact we know already that the current Meat Inspection Act provides all the authority needed for inspectors to demand the production of documents so they can look at them in inspections, and that it compels the processor to provide the information and assist in the provision of that information, as noted to them in a government-announced guideline in February 2012.

Can the hon. member talk about these repeated fallacies that Bill S-11 is the panacea for food safety and that the government has implemented all of the Weatherill recommendations?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Guelph is quite right.

In fact, not all of the Weatherill report's recommendations have been implemented, and the comprehensive audit recommended in the report has not been conducted. He is quite right about that, and the Conservative government is denying it.

As for the second question, it is unfortunate that Bill S-11 is being introduced in the Senate first. A number of my colleagues mentioned that we would support it, but that we would also recommend, among other things, an in-depth study of the situation we are presently facing and an assessment of the current status of the audit.

Bill S-11 will not be a panacea. We are currently dealing with a situation caused by a problem: the cuts to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which have made it impossible for on-site inspections to keep up with the growth of such businesses as slaughterhouses. In that sense, Bill S-11 will not work miracles.

The Conservatives must first re-examine the cuts and their commitments to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

• (2315)

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my colleague two very simple questions.

[*English*]

Does my colleague consider Canadian food to be safe? Does he consider Canadian beef to be safe?

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[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned, the Conservatives are trying to confuse the matter.

As I said in my speech, what we are seeing now could just be the tip of the iceberg. In budget 2012, the Conservatives imposed cuts by reducing the number of inspectors at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which means that we cannot be sure of what will happen with regard to the processing of meat in processing plants.

The government finally increased the number of inspectors to 170, but the work was not done in the slaughterhouses. Answer the question would really take a complete review and verification of what is being done in terms of food inspection.

I cannot give a specific answer to a general question.

Tonight, I would have liked the parliamentary secretary to give us much more specific explanations instead of relying on rhetoric and the talking points imposed by the Conservatives since the crisis began.

[English]

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to rise in this emergency debate. I thank the members on this side of the House, especially my colleague from Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques who is splitting his time with me. Also, I thank the staff and pages for staying tonight to be present during this debate.

I also want to commend my colleague from Welland for leading the charge to protect Canadians on this matter, to keep Canadian food safe and to get the bottom of what is happening. I have been following his work both here and on other issues and very much value his expertise on these matters.

I will take a bit of a step back and think about this from a less detailed perspective and about the kinds of things with which governments have to deal. They face all kinds of issues. Some of these issues are reactive in nature, such as natural disasters and things like that. Some of the issues are proactive in nature. Those are plans and programs governments want to introduce. Sometimes governments get these things right, sometimes they get them wrong and sometimes they get them terribly wrong. The types of policies governments get terribly wrong are often called policy disasters.

The worst kind of policy disaster we can have is one where the government gets something terribly wrong and the reason it gets it wrong or the issue that it has blown essentially is something it has initiated itself. Whether it is driven by ideology or incompetence, the worst kind of policy disaster is when the government initiates something and it results in a huge mistake and problem. It is the worst kind of government action. That is what we are facing here. The government is facing a policy disaster of its own making.

Thinking in that context, let us see where we are right now. Canada is currently experiencing the largest meat recall in our history. I do not think anyone in the House would dispute that point. We are a meat producing nation. We export meat and consume a lot of it, but we are facing the worst recall in our history.

Five cases of E. coli have been traced to the XL Foods meat processing plant in Brooks, Alberta. This Alberta plant processed about 40% of the beef in Canada. A problem with this plant is a problem for not only the entire country, but for our export market as well. Incredibly, this factory processes about 4,000 to 5,000 head of cattle per day. It is a massive undertaking.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has now recalled more than 1,500 beef products due to possible E. coli contamination. It is not a secret we are holding within Canada. The recall not only extends to every province and territory, but to 40 states in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.

The plant has been temporarily closed. The closure is impacting beef producers, who through no fault of their own have been caught up in this and the 2,900 employees who work at the XL Foods plant. It paints a picture of the size of the plant for Canadians who have not visited there. The hon. member for Burnaby—New Westminster has been there on a number of occasions. Twenty-nine hundred employees processing 4,000 to 5,000 head of cattle a day is a massive undertaking. Worse, some of these employees are receiving only partial paycheques.

XL Foods plant has had its licence to export to the U.S. revoked. This will have long term impacts not only on the plant itself, but on the whole industry. There are now real concerns that Canadian standards do not match American food safety expectations.

That is where we are. We are at a stage where we have a real problem, a real policy disaster. We have something that we have to address. Unfortunately, on the other side of the House we have had advice like “wash your hands, maybe that will fix it”. That is not really adequate for the type of problem we are facing.

How did we get here? We have had a lot details tonight. We have had a blow-by-blow, almost a minute-by-minute account by the hon. member for Welland. However, to look at it from a larger perspective, with a little less detail, it appears what has happened is a change in culture. It used to be that companies would slaughter and process meats. This is what they are good at. They would buy and process it, package it and ship it out. However, the government inspectors would go into these plants to ensure cleanliness and sterility. They would actually go into the plants, look at the machines, inspect them and give the okay and production would start up again.

● (2320)

These factories are often working on 24-hour cycles. This is an ongoing process and a very important relationship between the government inspectors and the producers.

However, there has been a change in how the Conservatives see this cycle working. It is a belief that voluntary inspections by the companies are adequate. This is not really driven by hard facts. It is driven by an ideology that less government is necessarily better.

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In this case, it does not seem to be better. Relying on voluntary actions of companies to ensure they inspect their own equipment is very susceptible to problems and what happens is something is missed. Without having government inspectors doing that work, the proper inspections and enough inspectors to do that proper inspections, we have run into a large problem here.

We have also been told that the inspectors working in these plants are spending more time looking at paperwork that has been given to them by the companies rather than being on the slaughterhouse floor looking at the cleanliness of the machinery.

This is something the Conservatives have done. By cutting funding, by having fewer inspectors in these large plants, we are relying more on the companies to ensure their own processes are adequate and then turning over paperwork to what inspectors are left. It is not adequate. We have the largest meat recall in Canadian history.

At the same time, we have not only had a change in regulatory culture, we also have had a change in the process itself. I have described the XL Foods plant that has 4,000 to 5,000 head of cattle going through it a day. What we have seen is a consolidation of the industry to an unprecedented level where we have meat factories that are so big they are almost hard to imagine.

In some cases there are small boutique butcheries that still exist. That is the way food production used to work. There were butchers who would buy from local cattle producers in small quantities. They would be able to inspect all the meat themselves. They would slaughter and butcher the cattle themselves and sell it to clients in small batches. If there was a problem, meat inspectors could sort that out. Now we have huge factories that are processing at a massive speed.

I have learned a lot about this industry from my father-in-law Thomas Ashe and his very good friend Peter Markin who have been butchers their entire lives. They started in the slaughterhouses in Belfast, Northern Ireland and moved to Canada and brought their trade here. They have been doing this job for decades.

I have sat down with both of them and talked to them about the process by which they as butchers see how things have changed in Canada. They have seen the industry grow from these small butcheries to the massive plants we have today. There are no bigger advocates for adequate food inspection than these two men who have seen this industry almost spin out of control.

Tommy and Peter have told me of their concerns, about how the reduction of meat inspectors will lead to disease and how a little tiny piece of meat left in a machine overnight can spin into a very big outbreak of certain kinds of diseases, like E. coli, that can be very harmful and deadly to consumers.

They also talked about how these were worst kinds of diseases for people to get. They strike people when they are unaware. They think their food is safe, but it is not. This is the problem we are facing.

There are lessons we can learn about the slaughterhouse floor from men like Tommy and Peter.

Also, the thought of how the Conservatives are systemically altering our approach to food inspection is a big problem. I do not

like to say it, but if the Conservatives continue down this path, we will see more of these kinds of outbreaks.

If we continue to reduce the number of inspectors actually on the slaughterhouse floor and in the processing plant ensuring that the things are clean, we will see more of these outbreaks. I am very scared of that. The Conservatives have not just created this one policy disaster they are in fact inviting many more to happen and it will be a systematic series of disasters that we will face.

● (2325)

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as a cow producer and as a person who has taken a meat cutting class and spent time slaughtering my own beef at home, I can tell the House that there is a world of difference between the health controls in the smaller, local, community-type abattoirs versus what we see under the stringent controls of the federal government. There are different standards in this country from provincial to federal and the federal standards that we have for food inspection far exceed, from the standpoint of the technology used, the equipment and cleanliness that is required, and the inspection that is provided by the CFIA in federally inspected plants like XL Foods.

Let us talk about the facts. This plant used to have 38 meat inspectors, including 6 veterinarians. It went up to 8 veterinarians and a total of 46 inspectors in that facility, an increase of a net 8 more in that plant doing critical analysis of all of the product going through that plant on the lines to ensure that the meat going through was being inspected. Unfortunately, XL Foods did have some slippage.

What we need to remember here, and I want my hon. colleague to remember this, is that we want to ensure the consumer that mistakes sometimes happen, we need to recognize that, but the food system in Canada, 99% of the time, is safe. The produce that is being produced by our agricultural producers and the cattle producers that I represent and those across this country are producing a great—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. There are other members who wish to put questions.

The hon. member for Burnaby—Douglas.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, I will take the word of Tommy and Peter. They have not only worked in small butcheries themselves but they have also worked in large slaughterhouses and they know exactly how inspections work. I have sat through many evenings when they told me this distinctively.

Canada brought in a tightly regulated meat inspection regime in the 1960s and it was based on having food inspection agents on the floor ensuring that these machines are clean 24 hours a day. When we have voluntary compliance by companies, especially in these megafactories, there will be mistakes, and that is why we have had the largest recall of beef in Canadian history.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there is no question that we have a quality product but we now have a minister who is clearly incompetent and a Minister of Health who is every bit as incompetent.

When Bob Kingston, president of the agricultural union, was before the Senate committee yesterday he had an explanation. He first talked about the compliance verification system and he had this to say, "How could this be, you might wonder? After all, the minister has assured everyone that there are more inspectors working at that plant than ever. You will be interested to know that in the XL plant, only a small portion of the inspectors are actually trained in CVS. That is right; for more than four years after CVS was introduced, most inspectors there have not been trained in how to use it. Why, you might ask? The answer is actually simple. The CFIA cannot afford to deliver training any faster and does not have enough inspectors to relieve those away while being trained".

● (2330)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. We need time for the hon. member to respond.

The hon. member for Burnaby—Douglas.

Mr. Kennedy Stewart: Mr. Speaker, it really is the general approach that the Conservatives' are bringing to this country that we should question. We see them on the planes reading Hayek and Milton Friedman. The whole idea is that government is the enemy and it has to be reduced. This is what is happening in the food inspection world. Fewer inspectors are better for the Conservatives because it is less government. Frankly, that is not working. We have the largest meat recall in Canadian history and the Conservatives have blown it, so has the minister.

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to stand and take part in this debate. However, I want to clarify a comment that was perhaps made by me earlier. My friend from Burnaby—New Westminster pointed it out. When I was being heckled by the loudest heckler in this House, the member for Malpeque, I perhaps misspoke. He is renowned for his heckling. He can heckle from P.E.I., even when he is not in the House.

I want to clarify that this is a serious and major event in the Canadian food industry. There is no getting around the fact that it has impacted lives, and it is very important that we recognize that. Our thoughts this evening go out to the families of those who are impacted by this, who have become sick from this. It is the worst outcome for any Canadian that an individual can become ill from eating food grown in this country.

My friend from the Interlake, in Manitoba, has talked about his experience with the cattle industry. I too grew up in the cattle industry. It concerns any producer of livestock. It concerns any vegetable producer in this country when E. coli is traced back to vegetables. As members know, that can happen in this country. There is no such thing as zero risk when people are producing food. Farmers do their best to ensure that the products they provide to the slaughter facilities are in the best shape possible, and they trust them to the slaughter facilities.

We have a lot of information going across this floor tonight. Certainly there are some serious problems.

I will refer to the Cargill plant in my riding, which has a very good track record. We do not want to condemn the whole industry. It is an important industry. It is an important source of protein for Canadians.

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I cannot help but repeat the fact that I am very disturbed that the opposition members are playing pretty loose with the facts. We have a food safety system in this country that is revered around the world. We have a Canadian Food Inspection Agency whose role is to do its best to protect Canadians and the food they are going to consume.

They are only human beings, and people make mistakes. We need to learn from those mistakes. We have learned. We shut the plant. No more meat is coming out of that plant until it is proven safe. A lot of the rhetoric that has happened here this evening is simply political posturing. The plant is not producing any more meat. The meat has been recalled. Perhaps more needs to be recalled, and that will happen, because the Canadian Food Inspection Agency is on top of that. It is making sure that the meat comes back and that consumers are reimbursed for it.

I repeat that there is no such thing as zero risk. CFIA brings the risk down as low as it can. CFIA is there in numbers. I have visited plants in my riding and have watched the number of CFIA inspectors. I have met and talked with CFIA inspectors as they do their jobs. They do an incredible job. They are dedicated people. Their role is to protect me as a consumer and all Canadians as consumers. They are dedicated people. They do their best, and we respect those individuals for what they do.

It is unfortunate that we are seeing a lot of misinformation being spread. There have been many references to the number of CFIA meat inspectors we have. The number 700 has been mentioned many times. That is 700 more than we had before. That is important. As I said, at the plants I have visited, there are a lot of inspectors. We now have 700 more.

● (2335)

The Weatherill report told us that there were concerns, so we added to the number of inspectors. That is what is important. There have been 700 more inspectors since 2006. If I recall, under the former Liberal government, there was a slashing of the number of meat inspectors. I forget how many, but it was quite a few. That was part of why the Weatherill report recommended that we ramp that up and get it back up to where it should be. In fact, we are now higher than we ever were.

Speaking of the Weatherill report and its 57 recommendations, we have increased the budget for CFIA by \$156 million.

I hear my heckling friend from Malpeque. I would think that by this time of night he would be starting to lose his voice, but apparently not.

There is a total budget for CFIA of \$744 million. That is an increase of 20% to make sure that we have the right number of people on these lines to ensure that we catch incidents such as what happened at XL, which is very unfortunate.

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If the opposition believes that the powers of the agency are not sufficient, it should support the legislation referred to many times to this evening, the safe food for Canadians bill, to make sure that the CFIA has greater authority to demand reporting. That is very important.

Let me be clear that the plant will not reopen. That is a critical fact. What we are hearing tonight are suggestions that this meat is being spread around. It is not. What is out there is being recalled, and no more is leaving that plant. That is not without impact. It is important that we protect people, and that is why that was done.

While we are putting facts on the table, let me also refer to CFIA's response, which started on September 4 when it first detected E. coli O157:H7 in products produced at the XL meat plant in Brooks. That very same day, the CFIA was notified by the United States Department of Agriculture about the detection of a positive sample of E. coli O157:H7 found in trimmings from XL beef.

The CFIA quickly verified that no affected product from that September 4 batch was in the marketplace, and it immediately launched an investigation into XL to determine the source of the contamination. This led to some products produced on August 24, 27, 28 and 29 and on September 5 being recalled to further protect Canadian consumers. The CFIA is continuing that investigation.

I have just given a vastly short version of a very complex series of events. A more detailed account is available on the CFIA website for anyone who is interested in seeing it. As the situation changes, CFIA updates it on its website to provide information to consumers and protect them.

My point is that these situations and what we know about them are constantly changing. As a result, the severity of the risk to the public must be constantly assessed and then reassessed. On any given day, the CFIA can communicate only the evidence that has actually become available, with the understanding that events are changing minute by minute. It would be useful to recap what we know so far.

● (2340)

As I said, the events began on September 4 with a routine inspection that revealed that E. coli was present in raw beef trimmings. The CFIA quickly determined that no potentially harmful products had ever reached the Canadian marketplace. As a result, there was no immediate recall of food at that time. Instead, the CFIA notified XL Foods about that contamination and began investigating the possible sources of it. On the same day, the CFIA's American counterpart notified the agency that it too had found E. coli in beef trimmings from that same plant.

Over the next few days the CFIA moved forward on several fronts. On the one hand, inspectors augmented their level of oversight at the plant. On the other hand, the agency continued to investigate the source of the contamination and whether there was a connection between the Canadian and the American test results, because at that time it was not confirmed.

During the early days of the investigation the CFIA and the company worked around the clock to determine the cause of the contamination. Under normal circumstances the CFIA has 40 inspectors and 6 veterinarians assigned full time to the XL Foods

plant in Brooks. As a result of detecting E. coli, the CFIA added even more oversight at that same plant.

The company took initial steps to protect the safety of food being produced. It also committed to take additional steps to deal with all of the issues and make sure that this would not happen again.

The CFIA then sent in a team of technical experts to turn the Alberta plant upside down. They looked at preventative control measures, food safety policies, laboratory methods and quality control systems. The technical experts did not identify any one single factor that would lead to E. coli contamination. Instead, a number of isolated deficiencies were actually uncovered. Together, they played a role in the overall contamination.

On September 16, the CFIA had sufficient evidence to issue health hazard alerts. The company began recalling beef trimmings for three specific days of the production. In the meantime, the agency continued its investigation and on September 18 issued five additional requests to the company for corrective action.

The CFIA is working hard to identify potential products that could be contaminated. Once the beef leaves the plant it can be turned into anything from sausage to frozen meat patties or be further processed by other companies into pizzas, lasagna or whatever. It could end up in a number of different retail stores. It is a very complex tracing process that has been undertaken.

This information is not available at the click of a mouse. It requires sifting through production and distribution records from industry, as well as conducting tests on samples. As a result, the CFIA issued several health hazard alerts for the same food recall. Each one had more updated information than the last.

Events continued to unfold very rapidly. On September 21, new evidence compelled XL Foods to recall beef trimmings produced on two additional days. On September 24, there was a report of positive E. coli on a sample from XL Foods in California. A day later, Alberta Health Services had linked four illnesses to steaks originating from XL Foods. On September 26, based on the company's information and the CFIA's investigation, it was clear the company had not corrected all of its deficiencies. The very next day, the CFIA temporarily suspended the company's licence to operate. At the same time, the company expanded its voluntary recall of products produced on those same dates in August and September.

The CFIA continues to take comprehensive action in response to the E. coli issue. To that end, the CFIA will reinforce its commitment to protect consumers. As a result, if additional products are uncovered in the days ahead, CFIA will continue to alert consumers immediately. The agency is running a transparent investigation and publishing information on its website as soon as it is available. Canadians can also sign up for email updates or tweets to get information on recalls and food safety concerns even faster.

● (2345)

Let me add that the plant is closed and will remain closed until the president of the CFIA satisfies the minister that the licence should be reinstated.

In an investigation of this kind, evidence is not handed to specialists on a silver platter. The facts emerge slowly but surely, and when the facts become known, they are shared with Canadians.

I want to take a few minutes to express my support for how the government is addressing the need for updated food safety legislation in Canada.

I want to inform the House about some aspects of the new food safety bill, the safe food for Canadians act. As members know, the NDP agriculture critic has said that his party will oppose this proposed legislation. I fail to understand how that would have any benefit in protecting Canadians.

The proposed legislation fulfills a recommendation of the report of the independent investigator into the 2008 listeriosis outbreak. The independent investigator's report made it clear that legislative renewal was necessary for the government to fully meet its mandate and the expectations of Canadians. Our government committed to address all 57 of the independent investigator's recommendations. This is the last piece needed in order for us to follow up on that commitment.

New legislative provisions are needed to position Canada to deal with new technologies and the realities of food production in the 21st century. The food safety environment is more complex today than it was just 10 years ago. The right tools are needed to properly manage today's risks and to better protect Canadians from unsafe food.

Canadian industry has long been requesting a provision prohibiting a person from tampering with, threatening to tamper with, or falsely claiming to tamper with food products.

The government also needs the authority to directly address those who perpetrate hoaxes on the public. Hoaxes generate unnecessary public fear around certain products and can also be economically devastating for the producer of the product that is targeted by a hoax. With this bill, we would have the ammunition to deal in a much more immediate way with hoaxes and report them to the public. Of course, the NDP is committed to opposing this important legislation.

Lifestyles are changing and the world is changing due to advances in science and technology. Technology is changing food manufacturing processes. International best practices, new scientific tools and advances in developing food safety systems have guided Canada's move to strengthen its risk-based inspection system. The bill continues this and supports that direction.

The proposed legislation would also provide for more flexible and effective tools to thoroughly and efficiently assess innovative food products and claims so that Canadians can have timely access to the safe products they want. Indeed, consumers want this. They are seeking updated food safety legislation. We have long recognized the need for modernization.

Consumer groups, producers and industry have gone down this path with the government before. Several attempts have been made over the past decade to get this done. This proposed legislation, one could argue, is the culmination of 10 years of consultations, as there were previous attempts to modernize.

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I am pleased to have been able to contribute to this debate. Once again, I want to offer our sincere thoughts to those people who have fallen ill from this.

It is good that we are talking about this, but I would implore the opposition to keep the rhetoric down and not to frighten people unnecessarily. People understand this is a serious issue. I would beg the opposition not to politicize it further.

• (2350)

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let me use some computer jargon: revision 6.0.

As the agriculture critic for the New Democratic Party, I have repeatedly said in the House that we are saying yes to Bill S-11. Amazingly enough, it seems as though the other side cannot take yes for an answer. The Conservatives keep saying that we are not in support and we keep telling them that we are. However, we have some very good suggestions.

I am glad you have finally understood. It only took four hours for you to finally understand that yes means yes. Maybe you should not keep passing the same notes around.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I would remind hon. members to direct their comments through the Chair.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, I do not think they should pass those notes around.

On a more serious note, Bill S-11 talks about giving inspectors more power than they supposedly do not have now. Section 13 actually gives them the very powers that this new bill supposedly gives them, so they actually have it. That is one fact.

I have two questions for the Minister of State for Finance.

On September 13, the CFIA, not the Americans, lifted the licence from the plant to export to the U.S. Why did it not stop it for Canadians?

As the Minister of State for Finance, he would know how the system works. In fact, the report on plans and priorities signed and tabled by the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food on May 8 of this year says that approximately \$46.6 million and 314 full-time equivalencies will be removed or will decline in the present budget year. Does the Minister of State for Finance agree with me that is actually going down and not up when that is signed by the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food? In other words, the money is coming out and the equivalencies are being lost.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): There are a number of members who wish to put questions. We have only seven minutes remaining. I would ask members to keep their questions to one minute and one minute for the response, at the most.

The hon. Minister of State.

Hon. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for finally seeing the light and telling us he is actually going to support a piece of legislation.

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I would encourage members to check the record to see the last time New Democrats actually supported something that is good for Canadians. I think this is going to break a record, I really do. Anything we have done for seniors, for the unemployed, or to help Canadians get back to work, they have voted against it. We need to put that on the record. If New Democrats are actually going to vote to help us fulfill our promise to complete the suggestions in the Weatherill report, it is great that they are finally coming on board.

• (2355)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a lot has been said about Bill S-11 tonight, and I want to provide a little history on it.

Bill S-11 encompasses some of what was in Bill C-27 in 2005. It was opposed by members who are sitting over there, now in the government. I will tell members who led the fight to oppose the government in implementing those new safety measures for the CFIA. It was the current Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food. That is who led the fight, the agriculture critic for the official opposition of the day. Let us get that on the record.

The Minister of State for Finance talks about rhetoric on this side. If he wants to assure people and do away with the rhetoric, then the two ministers responsible, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, should show up and answer questions. They should call a press conference and assure Canadians—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Malpeque will know that members are not to refer to the absence or presence of members in the chamber.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, that is the second time I have been accused of saying people are not in the House. I did not say that. I said the Minister of Health and the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food should answer questions, which is their responsibility.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Nonetheless, the time has expired for the member to put the question.

The hon. Minister of State.

Hon. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, is that not just like a true Liberal to suggest that the government needs to shore up the price of beef. It never ceases to amaze me how a Liberal thinks that government should intervene in everything.

Government has a role. The government's role is to put in place the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. That was done years ago. Its role is to inspect food, whether it is beef, whether it is pork, whether it is vegetables or fruit crops. It does that. We have increased the number of inspectors.

As I said before, this is not a zero risk situation. It has done its best. It is working on it as we speak. The plant is closed. There is no more beef being produced at that plant. The CFIA is doing its best.

Mr. LaVar Payne (Medicine Hat, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the minister talked about the beef plant in his riding in Cargill. I have XL Foods in my riding. I know that the minister has actually visited the plant and gone through it. He knows, as a farmer and cattleman, that these meat inspectors are there on the job and that in order for them to actually find out what the issues are it takes a lot of digging.

I am sure the minister could actually enlighten us rather than having the opposition think that with a flip of a switch the whole issue will be solved. This takes a lot of dedicated work and investigation. I ask my hon. colleague if he would comment on that.

Hon. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, we offer our sympathies to the community of Brooks, to the employees of that facility, as well as those who have fallen ill from this.

Indeed, the member is correct. Cargill has a large meat processing facility in my riding of Macleod. It encouraged me to come and tour its facility. It is not a simple process. The company does not just let anybody in. We had to jump through the hoops because of the security involved to protect the safety of the products in there. One goes in there completely covered in plastic to ensure there is no cross-contamination whatsoever. I met with the CFIA inspectors. I have lost track of how many CFIA inspectors I met with. They talked about their role. They are proud of their job. They are out there trying to protect consumers. That is what the Canadian Food Inspection Agency does.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I want to take this debate to a different level. I want to quote from the Weatherill report. In addition to the fact that we have lost food inspectors and we are concerned about food safety, we may not be addressing the big picture. The Weatherill report reads:

The risks of foodborne illness are also greater than ever before. Large scale farming and food processing...impacts of globalization...with access to foods from around the world, all contribute to increased opportunities for contamination. These same trends make it harder to trace the source....

I look at this one plant processing between 2,000 and 5,000 cattle a day, up to 40% of all the beef in Canada, and ask if perhaps the industrialized, concentrated corporate food model is not about food but about corporate profits and we would be better to support local farmers, local abattoirs and local processing

• (2400)

Hon. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of nonfactual comments in that. We have a system in place to deal with the processes we have in place. It is all wonderful to think that we can go back to only providing food for a 10 mile radius around our homes. That would be a bit of a challenge in downtown Toronto.

We have a safe system that deals with our modern way of producing food, whether it is apples, strawberries or beef. The world moves on and the CFIA has moved on to meet that. We have recognized that.

I would like to correct the hon. member. We actually have more meat inspectors than we had in 2006, 700 more. That sort of rhetoric is what frightens people. That is not helpful. We need to reassure people that the plant is closed. There is no more meat coming out of that plant until the CFIA says that it is safe to do so.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I thank all hon. members for their participation this evening and that of our staff, our clerks and pages.

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It being 12.02 a.m., I declare the motion to adjourn carried. (The House adjourned at 12:02 a.m.)
Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until later this day at
10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

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