



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES  
CANADA

# House of Commons Debates

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VOLUME 146 • NUMBER 204 • 1st SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT  
(HANSARD)

**Tuesday, February 5, 2013**

—

**Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer**

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# HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, February 5, 2013

The House met at 10 a.m.

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*Prayers*

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## ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

•(1005)

[*English*]

### PUBLIC SECTOR INTEGRITY COMMISSIONER

**The Speaker:** I have the honour, pursuant to section 38 of the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act, to lay upon the table the special report of the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner concerning an investigation into a disclosure of wrongdoing.

[*Translation*]

This report is deemed permanently referred to the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates.

\* \* \*

[*English*]

### ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

**The Speaker:** I have the honour to lay upon the table, pursuant to subsection 23(5) of the Auditor General Act, the report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development to the House of Commons for the year 2012, with an addendum on environmental petitions from January 1 to June 30, 2012.

[*Translation*]

This report is permanently referred to the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development.

\* \* \*

[*English*]

### PETITIONS

#### AFGHANISTAN

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I have a petition here signed by nearly 1,000 Afghani Canadians, including those from my riding of Pickering—Scarborough East, calling for the establishment of a consular and immigration office in Kabul, Afghanistan. The petitioners note, among other things, the deteriorating conditions in the Islamabad

office in Pakistan, which currently handles many of the consular and immigration requests originating in Afghanistan.

#### DENTAL MERCURY

**Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present 10 petitions regarding mercury, one of the most toxic substances. Mercury used in dentistry may contaminate the environment through the disposal of solid waste products and contaminate air from dental clinics. Dental mercury is now unnecessary because there are many alternatives to amalgam that are effective, available and affordable.

The petitioners request that the government recognize that the World Health Organization recommends the phasing out of dental amalgam and recognize the work of the intergovernmental negotiating committee. They request that the government assume global leadership in recommending the phase-out of dental mercury and the phase-in of non-mercury alternatives within Canada.

#### LYME DISEASE

**Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP):** Mr. Speaker, I am so pleased to rise today to present more than 500 names on petitions in favour of my private member's bill, Bill C-442, to put in place a national strategy on Lyme disease.

The petitions that I am presenting today come from Nova Scotia, British Columbia, Alberta and coast to coast, calling for this bill to be passed.

#### FOREIGN INVESTMENT

**Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP):** Mr. Speaker, very briefly, the second petition of 100 signatures is from residents of the Victoria area asking that the House do everything possible to obstruct, delay and prevent the ratification of the Canada-China investment treaty, which has still not been ratified, thank goodness.

\* \* \*

### QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

**The Speaker:** Is that agreed?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

*Business of Supply***GOVERNMENT ORDERS**

[Translation]

**BUSINESS OF SUPPLY**

OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP)** moved:

That the House call on the government to reverse devastating changes it has made to Employment Insurance which restrict access and benefits, depress wages, push vulnerable Canadians into poverty and download costs to the provinces; and reinstate the Extra Five Weeks pilot project to avoid the impending “black hole” of financial insecurity facing workers in seasonal industries and the regional economies they support.

She said: Mr. Speaker, to begin, I would like to say that I will be sharing my time with the member for Hamilton Mountain.

I am speaking today to move a motion on behalf of the official opposition concerning the employment insurance reform that was announced in the last Conservative budget.

Before I begin, I would like to emphasize a very important point. The government tried to hide employment insurance changes in its massive budget bill. It hoped that Canadians would not notice and limited debate. We had to wait until May to learn more about the government's intentions. Then, very discreetly, in December, the minister announced that new rules would be imposed on workers looking for a job.

I think this way of doing things is very cavalier and absolutely unacceptable, but unfortunately, it seems to have become the Conservatives' day-to-day modus operandi. How many times do we have to remind them that the employment insurance fund is paid for by employee and employer contributions only? The government has not contributed to this fund for over 20 years. How many times do we have to say it?

Before the government begins its attacks on unemployed workers, it first should have to explain to Canadians what right it has to interfere in the management of a fund that does not even belong to it. The government should then, through an open and clearly defined process, consult and have discussions with the stakeholders involved, namely, employees and employers. This was never done. This undemocratic way of doing things is harmful to employees, employers and economies and undermines parliamentarians' credibility with Canadians.

The employment insurance fund should be available when Canadians need it. They are the ones who contribute to it and so it is only natural that this insurance should be available to them when they fall on hard times. If we examine the figures for last July more closely, we see that 1,377,000 Canadians were unemployed. That same month, only 508,000 Canadians were receiving employment insurance benefits, which means that 869,000 Canadians were not receiving benefits. In other words, less than 40% of unemployed workers are receiving employment insurance benefits. It is shameful.

In the past, the rate of EI coverage was much higher than 40%. Before the Liberal reforms in the 1990s, access rates were between 70% and 90%. As a result of the cuts made in the 1990s, access rates plummeted before stabilizing at about 40%, the rate that we are

discussing today. Right now, the most recent figures show that less than 40% of unemployed workers have access to benefits, even though everyone contributes to the fund.

In addition to deliberately reducing access to employment insurance, the Conservatives are now requiring unemployed workers to accept jobs that pay less than their previous employment within a 100 km radius of their home. These new definitions of “suitable employment” and “reasonable job search”, which have been in effect for the past month, will have a negative impact on our economy and on Canadians' living conditions.

We are already hearing horror stories about it. For some, travelling 100 km is not a problem. Big cities usually have extensive public transit systems. What is troubling, is that the same rules are being applied to completely different situations. In the regions, communities are often far apart and jobs are harder to find. The government is not proposing any measures to support regional economic diversification, particularly in areas where the economies have a very high seasonal index.

In addition, the obligation to accept wages as low as 70% of their previous salary will only lead to a downward spiral of ever-lower wages, to the detriment of workers' quality of life.

● (1010)

The Conservatives' way of looking at the economy is rather simplistic, and this only underscores their gross incompetence when it comes to managing public funds. Their approach will weaken our regions, not to mention entire sectors that are vital to our economy.

The Canadian economy cannot be built on just a few key sectors; instead, it will be more prosperous through the diversification of many sectors, including the fishery, tourism, construction, education, retail trade, and so on. All of those economic sectors will be severely affected by this reform. Again yesterday, some staggering figures were published, demonstrating once and for all that Canada's economic performance is not nearly as rosy as the Conservatives would have everyone believe.

A Conference Board of Canada study found that an increase in social and economic inequalities in Canada is tearing the social fabric of our country and that the gap between the rich and the poor is continuing to grow, as is child poverty. Canada is doing a very poor job compared to its OECD counterparts. If Canada's economy is doing so well, as the Conservatives like to shout from the rooftops, should we not be in a better position to offer fair and equitable living conditions and income distribution? Should we not be able to reduce child poverty?

The employment insurance reform will only exacerbate this situation. Contract, part-time and seasonal workers want to be acknowledged and respected for the work they do because they are an integral part of our economy and our prosperity. They are merely a reflection of the seasonal nature of employment in Canada and the economic environment that the government has put in place for them.

Canadians want jobs, growth and prosperity, not a hunt for unemployed workers that will drain the regions and impoverish all workers in unstable jobs, including those in the cities.

*Business of Supply*

It is the provinces that will ultimately absorb the additional costs associated with the lack of access to employment insurance. People with their backs to the wall will opt for the solution of last resort: welfare. Who pays for welfare? Taxpayers, obviously. In short, all taxpayers will once again foot the bill for the Conservatives' mismanagement.

Lastly, we are now well into the month of February. Unemployed seasonal workers are coming to the end of their benefits. This is the black hole of spring. Action must be taken because it is now at our door.

The government need only look at regional unemployment rates to understand that its alleged economic recovery does not warrant putting a stop to the bill extending the benefit period by five weeks. People in the regions with high unemployment rates need it, not so that they can spend frivolously, but rather to put food on the table, heat their homes and put gas in their cars.

Can the Conservative government take quick action and reinstate the pilot project until we have studied the impact of the cancellation of that measure, or is it clearly saying that it is abandoning our regions?

Thousands of people have been protesting for months. Voices have been raised, those of workers, employers, chambers of commerce, elected municipal representatives and the provinces. This government must immediately backpedal on this measure before the problem degenerates into a social crisis and we are faced with serious cases or unfortunate incidents.

I will close by saying that no one denies that the employment insurance system must be reviewed, but the Conservatives' unilateral approach is unfortunately narrow-minded. It avoids all dialogue, even with experts. It is merely an attempt to please an ideological voter base and it quite simply jeopardizes our social safety net.

This approach is not in the interests of all Canadians, who can see through the Conservatives' dangerous game. The government must go back to the drawing board and open a genuine dialogue to determine with Canadians what they want out of their employment insurance programs.

I will be delighted to debate this topic with my colleagues in an effort to advance the dialogue and offer tangible solutions to Canadians in the hope that a genuine consultation can be conducted in this country.

•(1015)

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I have a simple question for my colleague, who is a member of the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities and the employment insurance critic.

The government brought in Bill C-38, an omnibus bill, but it was never debated. In a democracy, if the government wants to reform employment insurance, it would usually consult the people, send the bill to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, call the stakeholders concerned to appear before the committee—especially those who pay into the employment insurance fund, that

is the workers and employers—and sit down together to try to find solutions to the problem. The workers and employers should be encouraged to participate in this process because the employment insurance system does not belong to the government.

We should not take the “my way or the highway” approach to a bill, but that is how this government went about it.

Would it not have been truly democratic to have sent the bill to committee and propose that a national study be conducted?

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day:** Mr. Speaker, that is imperative. That is my answer.

It is inconceivable and shameful that we are not asking the people affected by these reforms to come and talk to us. These reforms affect the unemployed, people working on behalf of the unemployed, unions, communities and workers. The reforms in no way affect the Canadian government, which does not contribute a cent.

The workers and the employers are paying for these reforms. Therefore, it is imperative that this matter be sent to committee. \$58 billion has been stolen from the unemployed. We need to keep that in mind.

•(1020)

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, we certainly do not agree, because our hon. colleague is using words like “stolen”. I am shocked that a reform could be so misunderstood.

Does the hon. member agree that the program has always required that EI claimants look for work? How can she not think it is a good idea to clarify what is considered to be a reasonable job offer?

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** Question!

**Mr. Chris Alexander:** EI claimants who are receiving benefits are required to look for work. We want to clarify what is considered to be a reasonable job offer.

Why is the hon. member against such a reasonable, intelligent and modern reform?

[*English*]

**The Speaker:** Before I give the floor back to the hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles I would just remind the hon. member for Bourassa that after a speech there is a period called questions and comments. He does not need to be shouting, “Question, question, question!”, while the parliamentary secretary is asking the member a question. I would ask him to keep that in mind for the rest of today's debate.

The hon. member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day:** Mr. Speaker, I will respond to both of the hon. member's questions.

First, I stand behind my use of “stolen”. The government continues to steal: it has increased the contribution workers must pay by 5¢ and it has increased the ceiling. It is still pilfering over \$1 billion from workers. The government is not putting a single cent into this reform.

*Business of Supply*

Second, with respect to the roofing profession, it is the job that is seasonal; not the workers. So roofers and snow plow operators work when there is work, just like part-time professors. They would like to work full time, but no one gets their roof redone in the middle of the winter, and snow is not being plowed during the summer. So they go from one seasonal job to the next, but that does not cover the entire period.

My colleagues know very well that in some regions of Canada there is no seasonal work, in the winter or the summer, that covers this period.

[*English*]

**Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise in the House today to speak in support of our NDP motion to fix Canada's employment insurance system and to help those Canadians who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own.

The House has only been in session for one week. I rose in question period every single day in that week to hold the government to account for the consequences of the draconian changes to Canada's EI system. We raise these issues to throw the spotlight on the government's failure to address the needs of Canadians, but frankly we also do it in the hopes that the evidence we bring to bear will get the government to reconsider its direction.

Certainly, our efforts have worked in the past, even with the Conservative government. After months of raising questions in the House, the government finally backtracked on the F-35, reversed itself with respect to the export of asbestos and of course, most infamously, we were even able to force the Conservatives to concede that there really was a recession in 2009 and to invest in infrastructure renewal. Even with EI, we saw a partial reversal by the minister when she conceded we were right about the punitive impact of her changes to the working while on claim program. Truthfully though, I am less optimistic this time around. Why? It is because the chasm between the reality faced by unemployed Canadians and the minister's fiction about that reality is widening every day and I do not think that is happening by accident.

Let me just give two quick examples to illustrate the point. To justify the government's agenda of change with respect to employment insurance, Conservative members insist on saying that there are thousands of jobs going unfilled in Canada because the unemployed do not want to work. That is simply not the case and the government knows it is utter nonsense. Statistics Canada has shown that there are five unemployed workers for every reported job vacancy in Canada. In Atlantic Canada there are as many as ten unemployed workers for every job that is available. Clearly, the real issue is the government's abysmal record on job creation, not the desire of Canadians to work. What an inconvenient truth. No wonder the Conservatives are continuously loading the dice against Statistics Canada's ability to do its job effectively.

From that overarching myth, let me give another example of Orwellian doublespeak by the government. On Friday, I called on the government to come clean on the new quotas that the minister has given to her staff for recovering money from EI recipients. She is demanding \$150 million a year. The minister denied it vehemently, saying there was no such quota, but outside the House she later

conceded that there are indeed objectives to that effect. How can we in the opposition, and more importantly, how can Canadians have a fruitful discussion with the government about the devastating impact of its changes when the government so steadfastly refuses to be honest? I understand spin but the government has taken that notion to a level that is completely unacceptable.

Members may remember Stephen Colbert's term "truthiness". Well, we have it here in spades. Truthiness is what one wants the facts to be as opposed to what the facts are, what feels like the right answer as opposed to what reality will support. That kind of truthiness is a huge threat to our democracy because the legitimacy of democratic governance relies on an informed citizenry.

Let us try to turn the tide and talk about the challenges facing EI recipients in a realistic way. Let us look at the changes the government has introduced since its spring budget last year and see if we can work our way to a consensus about what needs to be done to reverse the damage. I am not overly optimistic but Canadians depend on us to give it our very best shot.

Throughout the recession the Conservatives largely left the existing EI program in place and in this new spirit of hope for co-operation I will even give them credit for adding several EI related stimulus programs to their economic action plans in 2008 and 2009. However, that was then and this is now.

Despite the fact that the economic recovery is far from complete, the Conservatives are now tightening the screws by making eligibility requirements even stricter so as to further limit access to EI, and by limiting the EI appeals process. These punitive reforms cater to negative stereotypes about EI recipients and ignore the realities of regional labour markets and seasonal industries. They will hurt both workers and communities.

Let us look at the facts. It is a fact that fewer unemployed Canadians will receive EI under these new rules. The government estimates that the changes will lead to 8,000 claimants being denied benefits, amounting to \$30 million a year. It is a fact that unemployed Canadians will now be forced to accept lower wage jobs, paying up to 30% less than their previous job. This will drive down wages for all Canadians. It is a fact that valuable skills will now go unused. A skilled tradesperson or teacher on EI will now be pressured to accept a different, often lower skilled job. It is a fact that workers in seasonal industries will be particularly hard hit, since frequent claimants are the most targeted under the Conservatives' reforms.

*Business of Supply*

• (1025)

Clearly, this is an ideological attack on workers. If the government were serious about connecting Canadians with jobs, its agenda would not be focused on tightening EI, but rather it would be focused on the urgent need to create jobs.

The real problem in Canada is that there are too few jobs. Further punishing the innocent victims of Canada's economic turmoil does nothing to right the ship. On the contrary, it adds to the decline of the thriving families and communities whose purchasing power drives local economies. If the government wanted to help workers, then it would be investing in training and apprenticeship programs that would train unemployed and young workers for available jobs. It could have adopted my Bill C-201, which would help tradespeople and apprentices to deduct travel and accommodation expenses from their taxable income so that they could secure and maintain employment at a construction site that is more than 80 kilometres away from their homes.

Those would be concrete steps in the right direction for connecting people with jobs. However, by focusing on cuts to EI instead, the government is simply laying the groundwork for employers to bring in migrant workers and pay them less than the prevailing wage. Am I surprised by all of this? Of course not.

Members will remember the Prime Minister's comments, in 1997, when he told the American Council for National Policy that, "In terms of the unemployed, of which we have over a million-and-a-half, don't feel particularly bad for many of these people". Not to be outdone, his colleague, the Conservative member for South Shore—St. Margaret's later called unemployed Canadians "no-good bastards". The minister is on the record saying that she does not want "to make it lucrative for them to stay home".

Clearly, Canadians cannot trust the Conservatives on this file. The Liberals pioneered the approach of attacking the unemployed, making EI less accessible and raiding the EI fund to the tune of \$54 billion. Only New Democrats have consistently fought on the side of workers. We know and believe that employment insurance is not a government benefit. It is paid for by workers and employers. Canadians pay EI premiums in good faith so that EI will be there for them in times of unemployment.

The reason my colleagues and I brought forward today's motion is to protect that sacred trust from governments' repeated attacks. We will roll back the callous Conservative cuts and we will continue to work with labour, business, provinces and territories to find longer-term solutions to help Canadians find jobs, without treating unemployed workers as the problem.

I invite the Conservatives to reconsider their approach and to support our motion. There is no shame in making a mistake. The shame lies only in the refusal to acknowledge it and correct it.

• (1030)

**Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I listened to the opposition member's comments and I have a few simple questions.

I would like the member to clarify if she recognizes the issues of personal circumstances, working conditions, hours of work, and items like that, which are outlined in what is considered to be suitable employment in a reasonable job search, but particularly personal circumstances, which we have emphasized. I wonder if she would clarify if she has heard that.

I would also like the member opposite to take the time to clarify for me that she understands that these are not wholesale changes. In fact, these are clarifications of what have been the expectations of employment insurance recipients for quite some time, well before these items were put on the table.

I represent a riding that has a lot of seasonal workers. In fact, we have a huge tourism industry. My constituents are really pleased with the implementation of these changes because they have local opportunity for employment at home. I would like the member opposite to explain what she would say to my constituents, when they are pleased with these decisions that have been made by the government.

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Mr. Speaker, I am delighted by the questions. When a government has to clarify a broken system such as the EI system and clarifies it by suggesting that EI recipients are bad guys and then expresses surprise that we would be opposed to those changes, I do not really quite know what to do with questions like that.

The member is saying that everybody in her riding loves these changes. I would extend an offer to the member opposite. I would be delighted, with my colleagues, to come to speak to labour councils in her riding. I would love to have that conversation. Let us talk to them about how they feel about these EI changes. Because anyone who is actually on EI, who has contributed to it all of their working lives, who through no fault of their own has lost their job, desperately needs the government's support.

Instead, the government is moving the line, is obfuscating what the rules are and is now treating EI recipients as fraudsters. It is completely unacceptable and I would be delighted to have that conversation in that member's riding.

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, two parliamentary secretaries have stood and have tried to present these changes as mere clarifications. This whole side of the House laughed at that one.

The changes are forcing workers in this country to take jobs at 75% of their wages. For example, a person is making \$20 an hour, but because there is a gap between jobs, he or she is forced to take a job at \$15 an hour while waiting for that next job. If a person is forced in that situation to take that type of reduction, when does that become a clarification? There was nothing written on that before. When does that become a clarification?

When did the downward pressure on wages in seasonal occupations in rural communities become a clarification?

Could the hon. member provide me with some clarification?

*Business of Supply*

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Mr. Speaker, I always welcome the invitation from the Liberals to get into the heads of Conservatives, but it is a scary place, and I do not want to go there.

Frankly, I think the hon. member is absolutely right. This is no clarification. This is an all-out assault on working people in Canada. It affects people in seasonal industries. That is why we on this side of the House are talking about reversing those trends. It also affects entire communities. That is why mayors, city councillors and communities from coast to coast to coast are opposed to the government's so-called clarifications. They are more than clarifications. They are gutting the EI system. They are a full-out attack on workers, communities and small businesses, which rely on the support of those workers to stay alive.

I really hope the government will reverse its direction and maybe surprise Canadians. Maybe it will clarify its position and vote in favour of our motion tonight.

•(1035)

**Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for talking about workers, communities and small businesses. This is a big concern in my province of Newfoundland and Labrador, where there are so many small communities.

Does the hon. member think there is any relationship between this program the government is undertaking, which is effectively deterring seasonal workers in Canada, and the temporary foreign workers program the government has been promoting assiduously?

**Ms. Chris Charlton:** Mr. Speaker, absolutely there is. It is all about driving down wages and making life more difficult for workers while trying to give employers a leg up. This is completely tilting the balance of the working relationship in Canada.

The hon. member is absolutely right. Members need to stop the senseless driving down of wages. We need to support the creation of good, family-sustaining jobs. That ought to be the government's agenda, not these draconian changes to EI.

**Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for Kelowna—Lake Country.

I am pleased to rise today to address the misleading statements and alarmist rhetoric the opposition has been using for some time with regard to the reasonable, common sense changes our government has been proposing be made to EI. Our government remains committed to fostering jobs, growth and long-term prosperity for all Canadians. This is why our government is investing in better connecting Canadians with available jobs in their local areas.

[*Translation*]

We know that people who remain active on the labour market are more likely to quickly find a permanent job.

[*English*]

Unlike the NDP members, who stand up in this House and defend those who defraud the EI system, our government is making sure that the EI system is there for Canadians who lose their jobs through no fault of their own, and it is providing the support needed to help

them rejoin the labour force. Our common sense clarifications are making it easier for unemployed Canadians to find work, whether it be through the increased job alerts we are sending Canadians or the connection with the temporary foreign workers program, so that Canadians always have first crack at the jobs in their local areas. We are making EI work better for all Canadians.

[*Translation*]

The changes we have made to employment insurance are necessary to ensure that it is fair and efficient. These changes were especially designed to help Canadians find work more quickly and keep it.

[*English*]

Members know the significant benefits that come from meaningful work. We want Canadians to be better off working than not, with the dignity of a having job. This is why we have clarified the definition of suitable employment and reasonable job search. It is to make sure that those who are on EI have a clear understanding of their responsibilities.

Let me be clear. These clarifications are not about forcing Canadians to move away from their local labour markets or from their homes. The government has been clear that these measures will help connect Canadians to the jobs in their local labour markets. Personal circumstances will always be taken into consideration when it comes to commuting times and transportation challenges. If Canadians are unable to find work in their local labour markets, employment insurance will continue to be there for them, as it always has been.

[*Translation*]

We believe that these clarifications reinforce the responsibilities of regular EI claimants and will assist them in their job search to accept suitable employment.

It is not to force people to accept jobs for which they do not have the skills or ask them to move to another area, or to accept low-paying jobs, as some have erroneously claimed.

[*English*]

I apologize, Mr. Speaker. My French is not necessarily the best.

If the opposition had its way, it would institute a 45-day work year that would cost billions of dollars. In fact, the NDP has put forward plans for over \$3.8 billion in annual EI spending. This is \$3.8 billion that would have to be paid by workers and employers during this fragile economic time. Premiums would need to be increased by over 15% to cover these spending expenditures today.



*Business of Supply*

I was involved in the EI rate-setting consultations that occurred in the fall of 2011. After travelling from coast to coast to coast, I can assure you that neither employers nor employees are looking for increased EI premiums to pay for this NDP-proposed spending.

EI will continue to provide temporary financial support for Canadians who have lost their jobs, through no fault of their own, while they look for work or upgrade their skills. It will provide help for Canadians who are sick or are caring for a newborn or adopted child and for those who must care for a family member who is seriously ill. That is why we continue to focus on strengthening the employment insurance program to ensure that it is fair and flexible and helps Canadians find work, along with balancing their work and family responsibilities.

To that point, there are several other measures we have recently introduced to meet the needs of Canadians and help them get back to work faster. Just this past August, we announced the new national working while on claim pilot project. The pilot project will allow people who are working part time to receive EI benefits and keep more of what they earn by being able to accept more work. A person receiving EI benefits will now be able to keep 50¢ of every dollar earned. This is instead of receiving a dollar for dollar reduction on income earned after their income threshold, as it was under the old program.

We know how important it is to stay in or be connected to the workforce. We know that unemployed people who accept even part-time work while they are getting EI have a much better chance of finding permanent, long-term employment or of finding it faster than those who do not.

Concerns were raised regarding the new rules for these pilot programs. The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development listened to those concerns, and adjustments have been made to that pilot program.

If people are in a situation where they cannot find or accept more work, and they worked while on claim last year, they now have the option of reverting to the old program rules, giving them more time to transition to the new program. Making it possible for Canadians to have more money from working than they would have from EI alone is simply common sense.

Working is an important part of our lives. It builds a sense of accomplishment, makes us feel we are contributing to something and means we can support ourselves and our families, resulting in a better quality of life. By making changes to employment insurance, we continue to move in the direction of making sure that work pays and individuals are better off when they are working.

We are continuing to build upon the best job creation record in the G7 with over 920,000 net new jobs created since the end of the recession. Thankfully, Canada has seen some of the strongest growth in the G7. This is why the temporary extra-five-weeks pilot project was allowed to expire. This EI pilot project was a temporary measure brought in during 2008 and extended in 2010 through Canada's economic action plan to help EI recipients during the recession.

This project was always meant to be temporary. In fact, a couple of the regions covered by this pilot project were actually able to end the project early, because their unemployment rate was below 8%.

One of the regions under the pilot had almost 5% unemployment for a significant period of time.

Our government will continue to forge ahead with policies that matter to Canadians by focusing on their priorities: jobs, growth and long-term prosperity.

• (1040)

[*Translation*]

Our government is committed to making targeted and meaningful changes in employment insurance for the benefit of Canadians and the entire country, and that is what we are doing.

[*English*]

Despite the hyperbole coming from the opposition benches, there has always been a requirement for EI recipients to actively look for work while on claim. All these changes have done is further clarify what a reasonable job search and an offer of suitable employment entails. As both the Prime Minister and the minister have said many times in this House, for those who cannot find work, EI will continue to be available to them when they need it.

The government simply cannot support a motion that is full of such misguided rhetoric and faulty information and is not in the best interests of Canadians and their families. Therefore, I call on all members of the House to join me in voting against this flawed motion. I encourage members of this House to embrace the EI components we put forward to make sure that Canadians can be better connected to jobs in their local areas so that they can have the prosperity they need for their families.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like the member to clarify.

I do not understand why she would say such things and talk about faulty information. We know full well that the government reneged on its decision during the pilot project. Anyone who was affected between August 2011 and August 2012 can choose between the old and the new method because the NDP proved that they would lose out with the new method of calculation. I have the numbers to back me up and I can provide them.

How can she say that it is faulty information, when it is coming from the other side?

• (1045)

[*English*]

**Ms. Kellie Leitch:** Mr. Speaker, let me be very clear. I think what the member was commenting on in my speech I clearly stated in my speech. As I said to the critic for human resources earlier, personal circumstances, travel time and other items like that are taken into account. However, the opposition members continue to fearmonger and put forward information that misleads the public.

*Business of Supply*

We want to make sure that Canadians have jobs. We have created 920,000 net new jobs since the downturn of the recession because of our effective economic action plan. I encourage the members opposite to get on board. Let us create jobs for Canadians so that they can have a great quality of life.

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I have a very clear, concise, non-rhetorical question. Could the parliamentary secretary provide me with some information?

Sometimes when legislation is passed, there are unintended consequences. The federal government itself is a large employer of casual employees. During tax time, CRA ramps up. During various times of the year, government departments ramp up. We know that the cost of training an individual, such as someone who works in Citizenship and Immigration Canada on a casual basis, runs between \$12,000 to \$15,000 per year.

I am sure the member could tell me what impact this would have on the federal public service, how many casual employees it would have and the cost the federal government will incur with the loss of some of these employees. Without question, the government will lose a great number of these casual employees.

**Ms. Kellie Leitch:** Mr. Speaker, I am not sure if the member is asking me about the attrition of employees.

I will say that the Government of Canada, as well as employers across this country, have created 920,000 net new jobs since the downturn of the recession. This government has had a very focused economic action plan to create jobs and long-term prosperity.

Regarding specific questions the member opposite may have, I am happy to speak to him afterwards. If there is information I can get for him, I am happy to do so.

**Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I was listening to the hon. member as she spoke about the many positives that are occurring out there with regard to changes to the employment insurance system. One of the positive changes I have seen has been commented on by some of my constituents who are anxious to make sure that there is no abuse of the system. I think the hon. member discussed that.

Could the hon. member comment on how employment insurance is assisting people who need a hand looking for available jobs, particularly in their area or elsewhere? How is the EI system customizing the search?

**Ms. Kellie Leitch:** Mr. Speaker, the employment insurance program has done a number of things to better connect Canadians with available jobs. One of those items is an increase in the number of job alerts. Individuals will receive frequent job alerts. As opposed to one every two or three weeks, now it will be two to three per day to better connect them.

I also encourage Canadians to go to our website, [www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca). It is a fabulous resource that has new tools on it. The website provides opportunities to connect Canadians with jobs in their local areas as well as opportunities across the entire country. I encourage Canadians to go to that website or their Service Canada office so that they can find the jobs that will help them make sure their families can stay in their local areas and have a great quality of life.

**Hon. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to rise in the House today to speak about this important legislation. I will be sharing my time with my hon. colleague, the member for Simcoe—Grey, the hard-working Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour. The member is also a professional pediatrician and a real asset to our community. We thank her for giving up her profession, although she is still on call, working double-duty, and has her hand on the pulse of the country, helping Canadians. She is passionate about this particular aspect of employment insurance and ensuring that we have this stop-gap measure in place to help Canadians in the difficult times between jobs.

I would first like to drill down into some of the details of what our government is doing to connect Canadians with available jobs. It is very important to clarify that the changes we are making are ensuring that unemployed Canadians are made aware of the available work in their local labour markets within their skill set. Basically, if there is no available work within their skill set, then EI will be there to support them as it always has been.

The government has established clear definitions for suitable employment and reasonable job search. These new definitions provide clarity for Canadians. Please note that these improvements only apply to Canadians receiving regular EI benefits and EI fishing benefits, specifically those from our coastal communities. They do not apply to Canadians receiving EI special benefits, such as the maternity, paternity, compassionate and sickness benefits.

I will focus on suitable employment for a moment. Several factors will affect the definition of suitable employment, including first and foremost the personal circumstances of the claimant. I think this is the point that the opposition may have avoided mentioning. Sometimes the opposition uses a bit of scare factor, using inaccurate information about the impact of these changes.

As a member of Parliament from western Canada, I was born and raised in Alberta and spent the last 23 years in beautiful British Columbia. I have owned my own business and worked for a variety of companies. I have been a union member and in management of an international company. I understand that applying for EI is not something anyone enjoys, probably ranking right up there with having a root canal done.

From my experience, the vast majority of Service Canada employees are hard-working, dedicated and professional people who care about Canadians. They care about my constituents in Kelowna—Lake Country and all of our constituents across the country from our 308 respective ridings. They take the personal circumstances of each claimant into consideration when they are determining what is considered suitable employment. The claimants receiving EI will not have to accept work if they have a health problem that prevents them from taking a particular job.

Here I think it is important to eliminate some of the fearmongering and non-factual information out there, and let Canadians rest assured that we want to lay out the facts and the truth.

*Business of Supply*

If claimants have family obligations preventing them from working at certain times of the day or if they have limited transportation, for example, for commuting to and from work, that will also be taken into consideration. Of course, if claimants are not physically capable of performing the work, they will not be required to take a job.

As the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development has mentioned many times in the House, these changes will be implemented in a fair and reasonable way. I think it is very important to reassure Canadians that this is fair and reasonable.

However, the topics raised by the opposition have not been reasonable. They have created fear about commuting times, telling people that they will have to take any job within a day's drive or something of that sort. The reality is that the requirement is for a job within an hour's commute, unless the claimant's previous commuting history and the community's average commuting times are longer. That is simple common sense.

If a claimant indicates they cannot travel outside their community because they do not have a car, that will be taken into consideration. Canada has the world's 34th largest population, but is the 2nd largest country geographically speaking. It is a very diverse country, so we have to take each region into consideration.

I will focus now on the two criteria for suitable employment that have drawn the most attention. One is the type of work, and the other is the wages that are considered reasonable. Frequent claimants are those who have had three or more claims for regular or fishing benefits and have collected more than 60 weeks of EI benefits in the past five years. Clarifying what a frequent claimant is important, I think.

Frequent claimants would be required to expand their job search to jobs similar to the job they normally perform from the start of their EI claim. They would also be required to look for work that pays wages starting at 80% of their previous hourly wage. If a claimant has had three claims, then they have to apply for jobs paying 80% of their previous hourly wage.

• (1050)

In determining what criteria will apply, EI claimants will be placed in one of three categories: long-tenured workers, frequent claimants and occasional claimants. I will take a few moments to define these categories.

First, the long-tenured workers are those who have paid into the EI system for the past 7 of 10 years and have collected EI regular or fishing benefits for 35 weeks or less over the last 5 years. These workers will initially be required to look for a similar job that pays 90% of their previous wages. After 18 weeks of EI benefits, long-tenured workers would be required to expand their search to jobs within their previous field and apply for jobs that pay 80% of their previous wages. Therefore, after first looking for work paying 90% of their previous wages and having been on benefits for 18 weeks, they would have to look for work paying 80% of their previous salary. After receiving benefits for a further 6 weeks, they would need to expand their search to any work they are qualified to perform so long as the wages are within 70% of the wages of their previous employment.

Occasional claimants would include those not captured by the definitions of frequent and long-tenured workers. Occasional claimants would be allowed to limit their job search to their usual occupation with similar wages, of at least 90% of their previous hourly wage, for the first six weeks of their claim. After receiving benefits for 6 weeks, they would have to expand their search for jobs similar to the one they normally do with wages of 80% of their previous earnings. After 18 weeks they would then need to further expand their job search to include any work they are qualified to perform so long as the wage is at least 70% of their previous earnings. They have a tiered process and different percentages over time.

It is a sad statement when the opposition engages in disinformation or fearmongering. I feel I need to point out the obvious, which is that no one would ever need to accept employment below minimum wage. No Canadian would have to. The fact is

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

• (1055)

**The Speaker:** Order. Order. There will be a period for questions and comments. If members want to participate in the debate, I would ask them to hold off until then and allow the hon. member for Kelowna to finish his speech.

**Hon. Ron Cannan:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I know we are all here to help provide decorum in the House and I thank you for providing that discretion.

The simple truth is that under these changes, EI claimants will always make more working than claiming EI. As many people know, employment insurance pays 55% of a person's average weekly income. Therefore, even if someone is a frequent claimant, a reasonable job will offer at least 70% of his or her previous earnings, which is a substantial increase over the 55% of earnings collected on EI.

This is why the opposition motion in the House today is factually incorrect. Canadians receiving EI will only be required to look for work paying significantly more than what they are currently collecting on EI. That will not push them into poverty; in fact, it will be quite the opposite.

Let me be clear on a further point. The Prime Minister has said many times in the House that if there are no available jobs, EI benefits will continue to support Canadians, as they always have. It is simple.

*Business of Supply*

I will now turn briefly to the topic of reasonable job search. Canadians receiving EI benefits will be required to undertake job search activities, including researching and assessing job prospects; drafting a resumé; searching for job vacancies; applying for positions; attending interviews and undertaking other efforts to improve their employability, such as attending workshops, going to employment agencies and job fairs. I think all Canadians want to work, so we are trying, through our Service Canada staff, to help them become more employable.

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

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

These improvements to EI will help more Canadians get back into the labour force and enable them to better support themselves and their families. Unfortunately, we have seen the opposition attempt to play the politics of fear and confuse Canadians into believing things that are untrue.

Personally, I am not into fearmongering and I do not think it is helpful to Canadians and my constituents or any of our constituents. Sadly, this is not the first time we have seen the members opposite ignore the clear realities of the Canadian economy to advance their narrow political interests.

I would ask all hon. members of the House to support our government's plan for jobs, growth and economic prosperity. This is the reason Canada is leading the G8 in job growth with 920,000 net new jobs created since the depth of the recession. About 90% of them are full-time jobs and 75% have been created by the private sector.

Therefore, I would encourage all members of the House to join me in voting against this factually incorrect motion. Let all members of the House stand shoulder to shoulder to work together to make Canada a stronger, safer and better place for all.

**Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, there is no federal minimum wage. Thus while the member opposite is suggesting that people will not be paid below minimum wage, the minimum wage does not exist in Canada.

Commute times in Toronto are longer than any other place in North America, so his suggestion that people will have to abide by the average community standard for commute times brings into question the Conservatives' failure to supply public transit funding to cities like Toronto.

My real question is about the spiral that the new EI regulations will cause to the wages of those people forced to take jobs paying pay less than their former pay. I think the member opposite would agree that if people take a job at 70% of their former wage and are subsequently laid off again, the new 70% is really only 49% of their

previous wage. As a result, there will be a downward spiral in the wage system, because the government has refused to permit those claimants to use their old wage as the new wage.

Would the member opposite like to comment on that?

● (1100)

**Hon. Ron Cannan:** Mr. Speaker, I never said that the federal government sets the minimum wage. It is up to each province. Canada is a federation made up of 10 provinces and three territories. We are well aware of that. We work together with the private sector to create jobs. We factor in the regional geographic differences across Canada, as I mentioned, and Service Canada takes those differences into consideration.

I also want to clarify a lot of misinformation about the employment insurance program across Canada. *The Globe and Mail* is one of Canada's largest daily newspapers. Last Friday it ran an article and then on Saturday in about six point font ran a clarification on page 2 saying the following:

An article published Friday on changes to the federal employment insurance plans said many could lose their benefits if they fail to find off-season, lower-paying jobs. The article should have stated that if work is not available in the region, EI will continue.

That is a substantial difference; it was misinformation. I know there is a lot of pressure on reporters in the 24-hour news cycle but drive by reporting like this does not help Canadians.

The fact is that every unemployed Canadian would like to have a job. Employment is a factor across Canada. We want to see all Canadians working. Let us work together to make that happen.

**Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I have a lot of respect for the member for Kelowna—Lakeshore, but he is entirely wrong on two points. I see this happening with some of the propaganda coming from the minister in this regard.

The member said that the Prime Minister has stated that the changes would permit EI recipients to receive EI benefits “as they always have”. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Those on maternity leave usually work a four or eight hour shift. They go in to work to keep up their licence or to keep up their skills. However, what is happening under the new system is that half of their maternity benefits are clawed back. Therefore, they are quitting their jobs because these are not worth the drive and paying a babysitter. That is serious matter. It is affecting them, the health care system and the economy.

Is that not correct?

*Business of Supply*

**Hon. Ron Cannan:** Mr. Speaker, my riding is Kelowna—Lake Country, not Kelowna—Lakeshore. We do have a beautiful lake shore. I welcome all Canadians to come and visit beautiful Okanagan Lake and the Okanagan Valley.

I enjoy working with the hon. member for Malpeque in the House and on the trade committee.

Specifically, the employment insurance file is important for all Canadians of all ages. My riding of Kelowna—Lake Country is fortunate because it has a very diverse community. British Columbia has been successful in creating jobs. I have been working on some programs, including the youth employment strategy. In the last budget \$50 million was included over two years. We all work with the Canada summer jobs program, which helps young adults going through university get their education. We want to ensure that jobs are in place. We are making common sense, practical changes. At UBC and Okanagan College all trades are coming together to create a stronger, viable workforce for all of Canada.

• (1105)

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, let me first say that I will be splitting my time with the member for Bourassa.

I am very much pleased that the NDP brought forward this motion today to speak about this very important matter, because really we did not have an opportunity. I sit on the human resources standing committee and this issue, as all in the House would know, was brought forward in the omnibus bill, so the impacts of these changes were never given a fulsome debate. Certainly, there are consequences here that will have tremendous negative impacts on many communities in this country.

I know that the Conservatives are trying to paint this as fearmongering. The exercise here is to try to bring them to the light, bring them to the truth, to the fact that these changes will have substantive negative impacts on many communities and Canadians. They will be far-reaching.

If members do not believe the opposition, then they should listen to the premiers from across the country.

Pauline Marois had a one-on-one meeting with the Prime Minister. She said that the meeting was okay and that they talked about the promises he has made with respect to fixing EI, because she had brought forth concerns about the changes to EI to the Prime Minister.

Let us talk not just about Premier Robert Ghiz but all party leaders in Prince Edward Island, who went across the province to solicit input from Prince Edward Islanders. In unison they said that these changes will hurt islanders.

In Nova Scotia we saw Premier Darrel Dexter and Liberal leader Stephen McNeil both raise these concerns. Jamie Baillie, who is a little shy of the boss, was not quite ready to make the jump and stand up for Nova Scotians, but I am glad the other two did.

They are speaking because they know that these changes will have a tremendous impact on them, because the people who will be losing access to or who will be knocked off of EI benefits because of the government's changes will end up on the provincial welfare rolls. That is the next step.

The Conservative government does not understand that so many Canadians live their lives that close to the line. That is a fact. The government should listen to the concerns that are being raised by the premiers. I doubt it will.

Municipal leaders right across the country, especially in rural communities, have sounded the alarm. I know in my own riding that the councils of Warden Lloyd Hines of Guysborough County and Warden Duart MacAulay of Inverness County have raised the issue of the impacts of these changes.

At the provincial level we see that there will be a movement of people out of rural communities to Saskatchewan and Alberta. The country will be tilted toward Saskatchewan and Alberta. This is coming from a guy who spent nine years in Fort McMurray, a place I have a lot of time for, and I really enjoyed the time I spent there. However, people should not be forced to make that decision. The premiers say that is where the people are going. The municipal leaders say that the changes are chasing people out of rural communities into urban centres. That will be the movement there.

It is not just seasonal workers. The municipal leaders understand because they are closer to the problem. They deal with problems day in and day out. They understand that if a group of seasonal workers has to leave town, then the merchants, the teachers and the nurses will leave town. When that critical mass is not there, services are lost because they can no longer be justified. Therefore, it is not just about those seasonal workers. It is about the impact on the seasonal industries and their access to trained labour. That is the broader issue here.

• (1110)

It is pretty cute. Some people have to get off the Hill. People have to get out and see what is going on in other areas of the country. I find, as a member from a rural area in one of the regions, that I am always trying to bring the reality of the region into the bubble here.

The parliamentary secretary stood up and said the changes are great for her riding. They are embraced by her riding. The annual household income in her riding is \$90,000 a year. The unemployment rate is just over 6%.

Let us compare that to Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, where the unemployment rate is 17% and the annual household income is \$40,000 less. It is a different reality.

Might I say that the incomes of \$40,000 less are from revenue being generated almost entirely through seasonal industries. I know that in Nova Scotia almost over half of the regional GDP is generated through seasonal industries.

I have had an opportunity to speak with industry leaders, business leaders and organizations. I had a representation from the Nova Scotia Federation of Agriculture. It is very fearful of the impacts of the changes being brought forward by the government.

The landscape association of Nova Scotia has shared its concerns. At one time, to be a landscaper all one needed was a half-ton truck and a wheelbarrow, and one could put oneself forward as a landscaper. I know that over the last 10 to 15 years there has been a lot put into professional development and training of professional landscapers.

*Business of Supply*

Sometimes it is tough to lay sod in February. Many landscapers knit together landscaping in the summer with snow removal in the winter. However, sometimes there are gaps for their employees. They are fearful they are going to lose those trained employees. It is somewhat naive to take untrained employees, put them on a front-end loader that is worth \$200,000 and expect that the machine will be looked after and there will be productivity. They need trained, skilled labourers as well.

I have been speaking with people in the tourism sector or people who own fishery operations. These people too need people year after year who are trained. They are fearful, and I am also hearing from business that because people have to go from \$15 an hour to \$10 an hour, they will take that job until the \$15 an hour job is back up again. The employer who has the \$10 an hour job is going to be forced to seek yet another employee. There will be a turnstile of employees with those lower wage jobs. The greater fear, for those who work in those industries, is there will be a downward pressure on wages, on the payment per hour. Benefits for those people will be at risk.

There were comments made by my colleague, for whom I have a lot of respect, to say people will not make less than minimum wage. That is why it is called minimum wage. When one hits the bottom, there is nowhere to go.

The most egregious aspect of this is the contempt government members have held for seasonal workers in this country. We read last week that there is a bonus being paid to the public servants who can find anybody who runs afoul with the EI system. The government has put a bounty on seasonal workers. Any public servant who can shake a seasonal worker out is going to get a reward.

If there is anything, it has to start from a position of respect. It is obvious through these changes that the government holds no respect for seasonal workers, for rural communities and for people in those industries. That is why I will be supporting this motion today and why I will be encouraging my party to support this motion today.

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the member has been in the House of Commons for a long time now and he knows his region well.

The minister and the parliamentary secretary are telling us that the government did not actually reform employment insurance, it just made clarifications. But the Prime Minister himself has said that employment insurance was reformed.

I have been involved with employment insurance since 1988, and I was elected to the House in 1997. Never before have people had to work for 70% of their salary or travel up to an hour from home. What is more, the board of referees will cease to exist and umpires will be replaced by 38 people.

Does the member feel that this constitutes reform or just clarification?

[*English*]

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner:** Mr. Speaker, to try to pass this off as just clarification is the biggest ruse. These guys have been exceptional at

saying one thing and—let us take, for example, working while on claim. We have pushed them and pushed them on working while on claim. I know my colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles said that they solved it. We were asking questions for a week and a half before they rose on the question. However, it does not matter. The member is there now and is doing a good job.

The minister stood here and we pounded her for about a month. Then she woke up and said they were going to have to do something.

All they did is doctor it up a bit. They said they were going to do something and they said that they were going to respect the old program, which was of benefit to anybody who only worked one, two or three days a week. If that is all the work they could get, it would be of benefit. The disincentive was taken out under the old program. They said they were going to fix it.

We know how that played out. There was no fix at all. People would try to register under the old program and the people at Service Canada would say, “Are you sure you want to do this, because we’d sooner have you on the new program?” One person who came to our office said he was asked the question six to eight times, “Are you sure you want to? We’d sooner have you on the new program”.

It is all smoke and mirrors. I will tell members who is getting gassed here. It is the seasonal workers in this country.

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, once again we have seen here an unbelievable performance from the member for Cape Breton—Canso. It is a sign of where the Liberal Party is today: talking down the economy; talking down the capacity of Canadian communities to create jobs and opportunity; talking down the fact that there are tens of thousands of jobs across this country, including in Atlantic Canada, that are going unfilled. His argument seems to be that because there are some ridings in this country where unemployment is a little higher, where employment insurance is going to have to be used a bit more—it is going to be there for Canadians—that we should not touch the system at all, that we should not reform it, that we should not make it work better, that we should not do these things that are necessary in the 21st century.

He does not want to clarify the rules. He prefers vagueness. He does not want unemployed people to get information about what jobs are available.

Does he not agree that his proposal to oppose reform of the employment insurance system would actually lead to higher unemployment and would prevent Canadians from getting jobs that are there?

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner:** Mr. Speaker, talk about disappointment. It is unbelievable. The last time this guy got up, he said it was just clarification. Now, he is up and is beating his chest about reform. Reform for sure. The whole bunch of them are reform. That is what they have shown here.

We do not fix one problem on the backs of the vulnerable. We do not fix one problem by creating a whole bunch of other problems.

*Business of Supply*

I am all for reassessing programs. I am all for keeping programs current. However, I am not for hurting one group for the benefit of another. That is what these changes are doing, these clarifications, these reforms, whatever he wants to call them in his next speech. Whatever he calls them, they are hurting Canadians.

• (1120)

[Translation]

**Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to commend and congratulate my colleague from Cape Breton—Canso for his work on the EI file.

To hear the government playing with words today and trying to take us for fools is quite outrageous.

I commend my colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles on her motion. Obviously, it is not a competition to determine who spoke first. As parliamentarians, we must make sure that we work together in the best interests of the public.

What makes me sick in all of this is that the government is in the process of creating different classes of Canadians. In other words, the government is targeting people who have chosen to live in a remote area, who have the right to have their place in the sun. Often it is a matter of tradition, such as a family of fishermen who have lived in the same place since the 17th century. They are now being told that if there is work in Alberta, they have to move there.

Is that how we define Canada? That is completely unacceptable. What is worse is how it is being pushed on us. First they force a massive omnibus bill on us and then they start talking about clarification. This has been going on for months, and then on a Friday evening around 5 p.m., right before Christmas, they shove this down our throats.

In the meantime, many people are having a hard time making ends meet. They are being told to go work an hour away from home if they want to work, but there is nothing much to see there but trees. The government is also suggesting that the workers take a 30% wage cut, even though they will have to pay for the extra gas and extra daycare costs. As for single parent families, they are being told to sort things out themselves, otherwise they will lose their benefits and be forgotten. They will then end up on social assistance and will no longer be the federal government's problem. They will become the provinces' problem, end of story.

I have been an MP for 16 years and I have never seen anything like this. They can point fingers at us all they want. When we were in government we made changes. And when the minister disagreed with my colleague from Acadie—Bathurst, he had the courage to go see the workers and talk to them. Whether we agreed or disagreed, the minister had the courage to go see them. Now, the ministers hide. Members come here in their bubble to try to talk about clarification, but they are hiding.

We never, ever abandoned seasonal workers. How did we manage? We implemented pilot projects and we also tried to find alternative solutions. We always tried to find solutions that would allow people in the regions to have their place in the sun.

What I find tiresome is the fact that not only does this government take the divide and conquer approach, but it also pits the regions

against one another. This government is telling people in the regions to leave because there are jobs elsewhere. I am happy that there are jobs in some regions, especially in the natural resources sector. However, the beauty of this country lies in its diversity. It is natural for people to decide to stay in their region and make a living from what they do best, whether it is in the fishery, agriculture, forestry or tourism.

Furthermore, the parliamentary secretary, with her condescending bombast, told us that everyone on her committee is happy. Her average income is \$90,000 a year. In other regions, people get by and are happy with an income of \$40,000. They should not be comparing apples with oranges.

This motion is important. Once again, it allows us to discuss the type of society we want to live in. I do not believe that this is a partisan issue. As a parliamentarian, I have two jobs. The first is to ensure that I protect the quality of life of my constituents, and the second is to ensure that the bills and motions we debate will improve this quality of life. We must also ensure—at least the opposition must—that we act as watchdog and keep a sharp eye on what happens.

• (1125)

What I liked about the speech given by my colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, and the speeches of other members on this side of the House, is her comment that we all make mistakes. Acknowledging one's mistakes is a wonderful antidote to cynicism.

We pushed the Conservatives on some employment insurance related issues and they backed off. Then they came back and tried to bamboozle us. It is good to realize that everyone makes mistakes sometimes and to be able to grow and prove how much we care about our constituents.

This motion is well written. I do not understand why the government does not want to support it. This is not a war of semantics. The question is simple. The Conservatives need to put themselves in the shoes of the people of the Magdalen Islands and realize that it means something when 4,000 people take to the streets to demonstrate. We sometimes see two or three signs here and there, but when 4,000 people are demonstrating in such a small place, that is a large percentage of the population. This means there is a problem. These people are not crooks. I will refrain from saying anything that I cannot say here.

When I was the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, I recall that the members of the Reform Party—because these are former Reform members—always talked to me about immigrants as though they were terrorists. Now they have changed their tune; now it is the seasonal workers in the regions who are crooks. I do not believe that the 4,000 residents of the Magdalen Islands and the people who protested in Charlevoix or the Gaspé are crooks. These are people who have bills and expenses to pay every month. They are being told that it is over and their EI is being cut off. They are falling through the cracks.

*Business of Supply*

Worse still is how this reform is being applied. We know all too well that cheques are slow to arrive. Temporary employees had to be hired again. The time it takes to receive a cheque is creating other problems. Not only are people not getting paid, but when they are, it takes time. It takes more than prayers to put food on the table.

[*English*]

I clearly do not understand. What do we have against our citizens? Why do we treat those people as second class citizens? Some people like to stay in some regions and they manage to survive financially through seasonal work. I do not understand why we treat them as a bunch of crooks.

It is all about respect, and that is why we will support the motion. However, when we have this kind of motion, it is also appropriate for the government to stand and say that it has made a mistake. Sometimes that happens. With all the debate and argument, the government can say that it has made a mistake. It does not have to look at the people like they are nothing.

I am not talking about semantics like wording, clarification or reform. What I care about is to ensure that those individuals who work like crazy will have food on their table, that they will be first class citizens and help their kids to become great citizens.

With all that, if we are not doing it, we are creating another problem, a major social problem in every region. The time has come for the government to wake up.

**Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I will give a quick story about the changes that are happening in my riding of Sudbury and how it is affecting the people.

A young man, 28 years old, was standing outside my office door from 7 a.m. in the cold. It is cold in Sudbury, although it is not always cold. We have nice summers. From November, when he lost the job he had for 10 years, until January he applied for EI and could not get a phone call back. He never received a letter or a notice. He showed up at 7 a.m. because he wanted to be the first person in. He did not know if he could put food on the table for his family that week. He said that he had paid into EI for 10 years and now when he needed it, he did not even know if he would get it. He asked what he should do.

The changes the Conservatives have made to EI are affecting Canadians in this way, and it seems they could not care less.

Would the hon. member comment on that?

• (1130)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** Mr. Speaker, I lost a close friend who was also a former colleague, former minister Diane Marleau. I would like to thank the hon. member for Sudbury for paying tribute to her last week. She will be missed. When I think of Sudbury, I think of Diane because she was close to her constituents.

The first thing that parliamentarians, particularly the government, must do is to ensure that we are able to answer people's questions. Our role is to provide a service.

The problem is not just that the reform will have terrible socio-economic effects but also that people do not know whether they are

entitled to EI or not, even though they have the right to get answers. I find that unacceptable. It means that we have to fight this reform and work to ensure that Service Canada is able to answer questions and provide this type of service.

I would like to close by speaking about another problem affecting the regions. Services are being cut and offices are being shut down because the government is in the process of centralizing services. This will affect the very definition of a Canadian citizen. We are all first-class citizens.

**Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to hear what my friend from Bourassa has to say about social classes.

Since I became an adult, I have been contributing to medicare by paying my taxes, for example. Thankfully, I have been lucky and have not had to use the system.

I find it hard to imagine categorizing people as being frequently sick, occasionally sick or rarely sick for the purposes of medicare. It would never even occur to me.

But what does categorizing people as frequent or occasional workers do but create social classes within Canada?

**Hon. Denis Coderre:** Mr. Speaker, I agree with my colleague from Trois-Rivières. Solutions must be found. When laws are enacted, they define what type of society we would like to live in.

Mistakes are possible, but what I find unacceptable is when people are deliberately defined and treated in this way and inequitable policies are implemented.

Our role is not to create second-class citizens, but rather to ensure that we can find solutions to injustices and inequities. This reform creates inequities. It will have an impact on social struggles. The middle class does not exist and yet people are saying that those who live in the regions are potential bandits who ought not to have access to employment insurance. That is not the kind of Canada I want.

**Mr. Claude Patry (Jonquière—Alma, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I am going to share my time with my colleague from Acadie—Bathurst.

Like my NDP colleagues, I wish to stand and condemn this employment insurance reform.

For a government that claims to be strong on economics, it does not appear to have understood how a strong and dynamic economy works. For a sound and stable economy, we need to create good jobs, diversify our areas of expertise and encourage innovation.

At the moment, the Conservatives, rather than concentrate on effective ways to stimulate the economy, seem to be holding a knife to workers' throats to force them to accept poorly paid, undesirable jobs instead of helping to making these jobs more desirable. It is deplorable.



*Business of Supply*

Not only that, but instead of promoting improvements to people's standard of living, they have raised the bar even higher, to unheard-of levels. The employment insurance system is part of our economy. It is what gives us a sound and diversified economy. It is precisely this system that makes our tourism industry possible and means that fishers, supply teachers, and forestry, silviculture and farm workers can have jobs.

These jobs contribute enormously to our economy and to the overall quality of life of all Canadians, even those who will never draw benefits in their lives.

For a government that claims to have a strong mandate from the people, it is not listening to them at all.

It needs to be said and it needs to be condemned: never during the election campaign did the Conservatives say that they would slash employment insurance. They spoke about abolishing the Senate and then went on a Senate appointment binge. They spoke about responsible management and spent \$1 million on limousine travel and all the orange juice that went along with it. Members know what I am talking about. This is not what people are entitled to expect.

That brings me to the reform. What to say about this reform? Is it the work of a clear-headed and intelligent manager? Hardly. It is a mess for everyone. Even the government will end up a loser at the end of the line.

Historically, the most serious problem with employment insurance is the 42% access rate. In my region, the number of workers paying into EI who will never be able to draw any benefits if anything unfortunate should happen to them will continue to grow. It is a scandal. Instead of attempting to correct the situation, the government is just plundering what remains of employment insurance.

Unfortunately, as we will soon see, the government has vastly misjudged the economic impact of this bad reform, which was inspired by an obsolete ideology and implemented in a rigid and thoughtless way.

This is no joke. Just last year, even the automated call system caused a crisis requiring emergency measures. Can you imagine what this will look like a year from now if this reform is not repealed? It will be hell.

For a government that has never brought down a budget without creating a deficit, it is taking extreme risks. It is a very bad idea to conduct dangerous economic experiments based on a pro-business ideology. These improvised experiments will have disastrous consequences for the lives of many Canadians if immediate action is not taken.

Now I must talk about my region, the kingdom of Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean. According to a study by a local organization, LASTUSE, and the Mouvement Action Chômage Saguenay—Lac-St-Jean, which work with unemployed workers, 45% of jobs are unstable or seasonal. That is virtually half of all jobs in Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean. This means that, at any time, 45% of regional workers may need to claim assistance under an insurance system that they pay for and that is essential to our economy.

The Conservatives have failed miserably at creating jobs in my riding, as they have in many regions they have abandoned.

Rather than support workers who often earn their living not knowing what tomorrow holds, rather than offer hope, the Conservatives cause even more misery for those who are being asked to make the biggest effort.

What can we do for workers who have unstable jobs? How will employers retain the expertise of their seasonal skilled workers? What will workers affected by the reform do when the pilot project adding weeks to the employment insurance benefit period in regions with higher unemployment rates is not extended at the end of April?

I really would like an answer. The spring gap is coming, and the people of Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean want answers from the government. They want solutions.

The unemployment rate reached 9.3% in my region in February, whereas it was 7.3% in November. We will clearly be hitting a wall very soon.

The government has to get a grip, admit it was wrong, go back and do its homework and cancel this unfair reform that threatens Canada's economic stability.

● (1135)

It is a disaster for too many Canadian families.

I want to talk about my colleague the Minister of Transport and invite him to do some thinking. As a regional minister, is he still faithfully representing the people in his constituency?

Sometimes I get the impression he is behaving more like the powerless critic of a government with ill-advised policy positions that put Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean at a disadvantage. Or perhaps he is somewhat blind.

As a Conservative member, would the Minister of Transport act the same way if he were still mayor of Roberval?

I have seen some disturbing studies on seasonal workers in my riding. Many people are brush cutters. This is extremely hard work; they work in summer, but not in winter. So these people wind up on unemployment. It would be better to find something for them. We could even send them off to study forest safety or machinery repair; that would improve their living conditions. However, that is not what we do.

Another thing that worries me is that many workers are illiterate. Many people in Quebec still have a hard time reading. Instead of holding a knife to their throats, it would be much better to give them training and help them acquire other trades that would permit them to earn money all year round.

Soon, if everyone works all year round, there will be no more seasonal workers. Workers want to work all year, but their jobs are only seasonal. For a fisher in Gaspé, when the fishery closes and the fish plant shuts down, that is the end.

*Business of Supply*

In Saguenay—Lac-Saint-Jean, tourism and agriculture are affected. Here is an example. According to an estimate I found yesterday, one in every 5 workers who does not return to agricultural work represents a loss of \$27 million for the country. We know what may follow. The government's actions are irresponsible; it should sit down and work with everyone else.

The hon. member for Bourassa suggested working together in the best interests of the community. That is not what I see here in the House. People are not working for the community; everyone is working for their own interests. I think the Conservatives, Liberals and NDP would be well advised to sit down and try to reach solutions for our constituents. We must not make them any poorer. That is not acceptable.

Today in 2013, beating up on people who are earning \$12 or \$14 an hour and making as little as \$300 a week just does not make sense. They are not the ones abusing the system. If the fund had not been cleaned out in the past, the money would be there to train our people and improve their conditions.

If the government wants to create employment, it must invest money. At present, job creation in my riding stands at zero. There is none. Back home, all we see is the loss of jobs in the paper industry and forestry. It is unacceptable.

As I was saying, the unemployment rate really makes me sick. Here are some figures: in the months of October and November 2012, it was 7.3%; in December it was 8%; and now it is 9.3%. It is unacceptable to have poverty in a country as rich as ours, and unacceptable to beat up on people earning low wages, push them into poverty and send the bill to the provinces. It is unacceptable. I cannot accept it, personally.

I also want to say something about the appeal process. People liked the old process; they could be heard, at least. Now, it is impossible. A written submission has to be made, or none at all. Previously, people could have an advocate and they could speak up. They no longer can.

Earlier, someone mentioned service. The employees of Service Canada are overwhelmed because of the budget cuts. Press 1, press 2, or press 3: your call is important, Mr. Speaker. Get a coffee and sit down, because you will find it a very long process.

● (1140)

[English]

**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, we need to recognize the importance of employment insurance and the benefits that it provides. It goes far beyond just money in the pockets of those who need it. It also assists in community vitality by preserving very important jobs.

We have communities across the country that provide seasonal jobs. Those seasonal jobs provide phenomenal economic input into those communities. Strictly speaking, for seasonal workers, employment insurance plays a critical role in sustaining many of those seasonal jobs. If we did not have EI benefits those jobs could very well disappear. The detriment to those communities would be quite significant. I wonder if the member would like to provide comment on that fact.

[Translation]

**Mr. Claude Patry:** Mr. Speaker, it is important in my region of Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. I was just talking about farm workers. We know that crops are planted in the spring and harvested in the fall. It takes these farmers to do that.

There are also people who work in logging, forestry workers. They are important. It would not be good to lose these skilled people and their expertise. The guy who finds a job might not return to work. The job might not pay as much, but he will not go back to the forest.

Unemployment provides an assurance that helps develop communities. If there were no seasonal workers to do these jobs, who would do them? Who would pick fruits and vegetables? Who would do the farm work? Who would clear the brush? Will we have to bring in foreign workers? I have nothing against foreigners and I am not racist, but we need our communities to thrive. The fact is that in my riding, 42% of people have unstable and seasonal employment.

These are important jobs, and we need to enhance their value. We need to help improve our expertise so that we are better, year after year. That is how we will become competitive and have good workers.

● (1145)

**Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I do not know if my hon. colleague is like me, but when I hear Liberal MPs talk about employment insurance, my ears burn. I cannot stand it anymore. It is unbelievable that these people are pretending to be the good guys.

I just heard the member for Bourassa pretend to be the good guy. The Liberal government stole from workers and employers by diverting \$57 billion. How can the Liberals stand here today and talk about employment insurance?

Can my colleague comment on that?

**Mr. Claude Patry:** Mr. Speaker, this is a long-standing issue. The Liberals looted the employment insurance fund. Let us not forget that the Conservatives helped them. Now the Conservatives are destroying it, ruining it entirely. It is even worse. This crime was never punished. Taking money that belonged to workers and employers was a crime. Instead of using that money to train people and provide better service to them, that money was misappropriated and spent elsewhere.

**Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I really appreciated the member for Jonquière—Alma's speech. He is very passionate and ardently defends the interests of people from the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region, a region I know and love. He is truly an outstanding and passionate MP.

He talked about the impact of the Conservatives' raft of changes. What does this mean for people? We now have 300,000 more unemployed workers than we did when the recession began. Everyone knows that. This government's cuts have caused thousands of families to lose their employment insurance benefits.

What impact might this have on small businesses in the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, businesses that depend on those consumers?

*Business of Supply*

**Mr. Claude Patry:** Mr. Speaker, there will certainly be an economic impact. If people do not go back to work, those employers could fold. Some say that if they do not get their people back in the spring, they will not be able to operate.

According to one study, one in five agricultural workers will not return to work. Based on Canada's GDP, that adds up to a \$27 million loss. For a region like ours, the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean, \$27 million is a pretty penny. That will have a huge negative impact.

I would like the Conservatives to sit down with us and find a solution. We can work together. We can work for people. Let us stop playing politics and start working for Canadians.

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the NDP motion today very clearly calls on the Conservatives to throw their reform in the trash bin. That is what the people are calling for. The motion is calling for the five weeks pilot project to be reinstated, to avoid what is called the “black hole”. These are the two things set out in the NDP motion.

When we say throw the bill in the trash bin, we do not mean to come back with something else. And while we are on the subject—I have been here and I have been talking about employment insurance for a long time—I would like some attention to be paid to the employment insurance program, to seasonal jobs and to our regions. I would like the piecemeal cuts to employment insurance to stop, and I would like the government instead to find a way to make the program work for working people. It is an insurance policy.

In all honesty, it is called an insurance program that employees and employers pay into, but if there were a vote today on whether employers want to pay into the employment insurance fund, the answer would be no.

Employers are happy to profit from employees, but when they are done with them, they want to get rid of them. I say that with all due respect, even though I know it will make some people angry. In its employment insurance reform, the government is offering to allow companies not to pay up to \$1,000 in employment insurance for each new employee. The government will even help companies collect \$1,000 if they hire a new person, when the purpose of employment insurance is to help workers.

On the subject of Bill C-38, what the NDP is saying is that if the government wanted to make changes to employment insurance and it was just a matter of clarifications, why did it not bring them up at the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities? Why did it not invite industry and workers? Why did it not sit down with those people to address the problem?

When the Liberals made their changes, it started with the Conservatives, in 1988. At that time, the Liberals said that if there were changes to employment insurance it would be disastrous for New Brunswick. I recall the former minister of human resources, who was not the minister at the time, Doug Young, who in 1993 replaced the minister who is still in the House today as the minister for ACOA, saying that was insulting.

The government has said that the NDP is scaring people, but the first thing the minister for ACOA from New Brunswick said was that people still like to get employment insurance so they can go hunting

and fishing. That is insulting. It is the worst insult that can be thrown at working people. It means that it is not enough to have seasonal work and cut employment insurance, he is even going to criticize us if we go hunting and fishing. He is insulting people who want the benefit of employment insurance.

We live in regions where work is seasonal. We did not choose the place where we came into this world. That is not a choice. Mr. Speaker, you certainly did not choose the place where you came into this world. The people where I come from, whether on the Acadian Peninsula or in the Acadie—Bathurst region, or in the Gaspé or Nova Scotia or Prince Edward Island, living along the coastlines, did not choose to come into the world in those places, but they did. And that is part of our country. So is the country united or divided?

There was a time when things were not going all that well in Alberta. It was a time when people were poor, but I am happy for them now that things are going better. When I asked the minister responsible for ACOA for assistance for the Bathurst Airport, for renovations and an extension to the runway for our workers who were going to work in the west, the first thing he said was that rather than work to promote economic development in our region, he would prefer to have an airport that would enable people to go and work elsewhere.

On the one hand, the government is saying that there are jobs across Canada and that people should be mobile and prepared to work elsewhere. On the other hand, when we want to help people go and work elsewhere, the government makes it impossible for us to do so. It cannot even provide northeastern New Brunswick with an airport.

● (1150)

I do not want people to move elsewhere, but it would at least be useful to those who do so, for Canadians and people from our region who want to go.

Last Friday, I watched *Le Téléjournal national* with Céline Galipeau. I would like to comment on statements made by Toronto journalist Tasha Kheiriddin. I would like to invite her to come and see us. The people back home are not too fond of her at the moment.

What did Tasha say on TV? She said that people from the Atlantic provinces who worked seasonally ought to know that Canada is a country of immigrants and that since immigrants work anywhere, they should go and work out west.

I do not believe that this journalist understood what she was telling the women back home, the mothers who work in fish plants, because it is not just men. In fact most of the people who work in these plants are women. Should they all hop on a plane to work out west because that is where the jobs are, and leave their children at home? People like that are called 20/10s. They go and work for 20 days and return home for 10 days. Those are the kinds of jobs we have back home.

The NDP motion refers to a five-week black hole. What will the government do in March and April when the employment insurance benefits stop?

*Business of Supply*

The journalist said that the Conservatives had created approximately 900,000 jobs. They did not create them where I live. There are no jobs there. Finding work is difficult. That is why a pilot project has been under way in the regions since 2004 for people with seasonal jobs in places like the Gaspé, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. The five weeks of benefits would see the workers through until the next season.

Paul Robichaud, New Brunswick's Deputy Premier, said that this would hurt the province and employees. He asked the government to backtrack; otherwise the people in question would end up on welfare. However, things can be even worse. If two people who live together work in a fish plant and one is receiving employment insurance benefits or returns to work and the other loses employment insurance benefits, then there is no entitlement to welfare. This will mean total poverty.

And that is why we are asking the minister to consider the harm that the Conservatives are causing to workers. We are asking the Prime Minister to think about what he is doing to our country.

I have already asked in the House what workers have done to the Prime Minister. What have the workers who have built this country done to the Prime Minister to make him hate them so much?

What have they done? They have contributed to an employment insurance fund that belongs to them.

I remember one of the minister's speeches. She said that she wanted Canadians to work 12 months a year. My goodness, if they want people to work 12 months a year, they should invest in our secondary and tertiary processing plants. The government has to help people work. People where I come from are not slackers, nor are they lazy. The Conservatives need to stop investing their money solely in the west. They need to come east.

When we ask for airport repairs, nothing happens. They are in the process of shutting down the rail line between Moncton and Bathurst. All of Atlantic Canada's economic development infrastructure is being shut down. And the Prime Minister is saying that people do not want to work.

ACOA lost \$78 million in investment funding. That money could have helped small businesses. But quite the opposite is happening.

Benoît Bouchard, the former Conservative transport minister under Brian Mulroney, said last week on national television that they tried to change employment insurance but that it did not work. The Liberals tried and cut employment insurance benefits, but it did not work. The Conservatives are trying the same thing. They will soon see that it does not work.

Perhaps people were frustrated yesterday to hear me say in the House that the Acadians will not be deported again. But that is how people are feeling. They feel they have to leave home. It is not right that our people should be forced to leave when we have forestry, fishing and tourism industries.

• (1155)

I will finish on that point. Once again, we are asking the government to listen to the people. It should come see what is happening, scrap this reform and start over.

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to address the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst. He was here in the spring when representatives from Prince Edward Island came to our offices and asked to meet with the Prime Minister regarding this famous mammoth bill, Bill C-38, introduced last spring. Those people could foresee what was going to happen. So they wanted to propose some changes to the bill so they would not find themselves stuck in the quagmire that we are all in today, and I say “quagmire” to avoid using unparliamentary language.

I wonder if my colleague could share his thoughts and tell us why it is so important to revisit the famous five week spring gap.

• (1200)

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives accuse us of saying things that are false. We are asking the minister to join us on the ground and asking Conservative members to explain how anything we are saying is false. The minister says there is no reform.

Yet, as she explains, there will be a 30% drop in salaries, people will have to accept work an hour away from their home and the board of referees and umpires will be removed. But there is no reform.

People back home know that this will hurt them. Employers understand that they will lose good workers who are trained in the industry. They cannot afford that. But it gets worse. Those employees will be replaced by temporary foreign workers.

It appears that the formula will be to make our people work 12 months of the year and to put temporary foreign workers into seasonal jobs. They will pay income tax and pay into EI, and then they will go back home on the next plane out. That is what the Conservatives are trying to set up. They want to replace seasonal workers with temporary foreign workers. That is not what people want. These are our communities, and they are important to us.

It is a shame that the minister refuses to meet with workers on this matter. If she were a responsible minister, she would agree to attend the meeting on February 27.

[*English*]

**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, the government is, in fact, trying to tell individuals who are unemployed to relocate and go wherever the jobs might be.

One of the things that really needs to be taken into consideration, and the member for Acadie—Bathurst made reference to it, is that people might be in a situation where they have children and so forth. Another situation is where an individual is unemployed, maybe because of seasonal work or for whatever reason, and his or her spouse is employed in the community. To obligate an individual to relocate outside of a region, let alone a province, could have a very profound impact on the family unit, let alone the community, because of the loss of that particular individual.

I wonder if the member might want to elaborate on that particular point. It is not as simple as telling someone to go out and find a job, even if it means leaving the region or the province, because it would have huge ramifications, not only for the family but also for the community as a whole.

*Business of Supply*

[Translation]

**Mr. Yvon Godin:** Mr. Speaker, it does affect families. Nobody can say that it does not.

It is fine and dandy when people want to go elsewhere. But the minister told people that they should go work elsewhere. On television Thursday night, Tasha Kheiriddin said that we are a nation of immigrants and that people should be expected to go anywhere. That is the kind of thing people are saying.

Women who have to go work in Fort McMurray have to leave behind their family, their children. What is happening, what people are saying, is inhuman.

The minister turned around and told people to find work within an hour of home. But in Canada we have a thing called winter. For people travelling from Caraquet to Bathurst or Bathurst to Shippagan, storms are not just about snow. The wind alone is storm enough.

Yet the government wants to force 2,000 to 3,000 women who lose their jobs in fish plants to travel. Other people, 60-year-olds, do not have the education to get another job. People are nervous. The government is disrespecting workers, treating them with contempt. This affects families. Lots of people go west, and then they come back. The number of divorces and separations is incredible. It happens constantly.

People in my region are committing suicide. If the *Acadie Nouvelle* reports the death at home of a 40-year-old, it is not because of a heart attack. The suicide rate in my region is high. That is why I get so worked up in the House. I know the devastating effects of all of this on our people, on workers all over the Gaspé and the Atlantic provinces.

The government has no respect, and neither did the Liberals when they stole \$57 billion from the employment insurance fund.

[English]

**Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the great member for Elmwood—Transcona.

Today I am here to give some perspective for hon. members opposite on measures that have been introduced by the government to the EI program.

The purpose is to ensure the EI program is working for Canadians. The design of it is to help find work and get people back to work. Our government is committed to supporting workers and ensuring that EI enables a strong and competitive workforce. This is in line with our government's focus on jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. Many of the clarifications to the EI program are designed to make it easier and to better connect unemployed Canadians to the jobs in their local labour market.

The government has announced several targeted common sense clarifications to encourage Canadians to stay active in the job market and to remove disincentives for individuals. These changes include better connecting Canadians with available opportunities in their local area, clarifying their responsibilities while collecting EI and establishing a new pan-Canada approach for calculating EI benefits.

Those living in regions of comparable labour market conditions should receive similar benefits.

Canadians may not be aware of local jobs within their skill sets and that is why, as a government, we will be providing enhanced job alerts. They are there to inform Canadians of where the local jobs are. Therefore, as of January 2013, recipients can sign-up to receive two emails a day through the enhanced job alert program. This is a vast improvement over the previous program that sent out alerts once or twice a week.

However, the opposition continues to argue that these changes will limit access to EI. Therefore, we need to be very clear about what EI is. An individual who is on EI has a responsibility to undertake an active job search. All these changes do is further clarify what that job search should be like, but this does not affect access to the EI program at all.

The new definition for a “reasonable job search” includes a wage that is significantly better than the benefits paid out by EI. It cannot be said that these changes are pushing greater Canadians into poverty. In fact, it is quite the opposite. With greater workforce attachment, Canadian families are always better off.

Our government has introduced many other EI measures that are designed to support Canadian families, the fundamental units of society and the backbone of any successful country.

For example, foster parents adopting foster children into their care now have access to parental benefits earlier on. Eligibility to the compassionate care benefit has been extended to include additional family members and others considered as family by the person who is gravely ill. The self-employed, which I have been all my life, will now have the option to opt into EI programs, which has never been offered before, to receive maternal, parental, sickness and compassionate care benefits. As for military families, there is now improved access to parental benefits.

Our government also recognizes that it may difficult for people who have full-time jobs to care for family members with serious illnesses or injuries. That is why we want to help families balance their work and family responsibility with the financial difficulties that happen during those times. Specifically, the Helping Families in Need Act, which was passed in the fall, is to help hard-working Canadian families at a time when they need it most. It is an important and fundamental value that truly connects all of us as Canadians.

We understand on this side that raising a child is the most important, responsible thing that we ever have to do. I have three grown children and nine grandchildren, and I can attest to that.

*Business of Supply*

•(1205)

Therefore, when a parent is struggling with an illness while balancing responsibilities, whether at work, at home or both, the whole family becomes affected. Under the Helping Families in Need Act, parents are now able to access sickness benefits if they fall ill while receiving parental benefits. Additionally, as part of the bill, we included changes required to allow for other income supports for families when they needed it the most.

We now offer EI benefits to parents of critically ill or injured children.

These new benefits are there to help reduce some of the financial pressures that parents experience. I think that through our families or a personal experience, all of us can relate to what that means and the toll it takes.

Last year we also announced a new grant to support parents coping with the disappearance or the death of a child as a result of a suspected criminal act. We read and hear of way too much of that every day in the news.

Our government is combining our proven track record of adapting the employment insurance program to foster economic growth along with support for parents who are victims, helping to ease them financially.

We want to improve the EI program to make it more flexible for Canadians by adding benefits for parents who need to take time away from work to focus on a critically ill or injured child, all to help them focus on the issues that really matter as a parent or grandparent.

Our desire is to help families. It is a desire that motivated the government to renew the extra five weeks pilot project through the worst recession since the thirties. We understand that many industries are working less and we want to help Canadians through that very tough and difficult time.

While we still all recognize that these are fragile economic times, particularly around the world, we have seen a significant and strong growth in the Canadian economy and labour market, with over 920,000 new net jobs since July of 2009. We now have more jobs in Canada than at any point in our history.

Many of the regions covered by this pilot project have now seen excellent or significant recovery as well. There were in fact a couple of regions that prematurely pulled away from that pilot project because their unemployment rates had receded so well.

Our government remains committed to jobs, growth and long-term prosperity for all Canadians. On this side of the House, and I believe across all sides of the House, we are proud of our country, the job creation and the economic standing that we have seen and been recognized for around the world. Therefore, let all of us stay focused on growing jobs and continuing to develop a long-term prosperity for all Canadians.

•(1210)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I am not against the fact that the government is giving people information to help them find a job. It would be terrible to say that we do not

want people to know. We know why employment insurance exists: in case you lose your job.

But we have gotten to a point where, in regions that survive on seasonal work, over 2,000 people are laid off at the same time in the fall. What do we do with those people? That is the situation and that was the reason for the pilot project. That is where it hurts.

I just received an email, and I will talk about it quickly. A government official was at a house in Tracadie-Sheila to bring forms to be filled out to prove that the person had looked for work. The employee had to go to the Tracadie-Sheila office the next day with the completed forms, otherwise his unemployment would be cut off. And you say you want to help workers, when it has gotten to the point that your officials are going to people's homes.

I would like an answer from the member who just rose to say that the government is trying to help workers. It is to the point that police-types are being sent to homes. Sending officials to people's homes has never been done before in Canada. This is just the beginning. Where will this end?

You say that this is a good country and that we need to be a united country. Your Conservative government is not going to create a united country by treating workers this way.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** Mr. Speaker, I am not familiar with the hon. member's riding, but I am with my riding of Lambton—Kent—Middlesex where it is very much small towns and rural, which means agriculture. We rely significantly on the labour force because of agriculture. People may say that the trouble with agriculture is that they are the jobs nobody else wants. These jobs are very much respected and I have never taken the opinion that because one works in agriculture, driving a truck, the agriculture industry or any service industry, that those jobs are below what people should be doing. Those are jobs that we encourage Canadians to pick up the ball on and help those industries because they are the backbone of our country. Those industries make up 90% of the small businesses in Canada. Those small businesses are the ones that generate the economic growth for the major part of our country.

In my riding we encourage Canadians who are looking for jobs to go to those jobs because there is nothing wrong with them. We would make that a part of the positive job creation in our country.

•(1215)

**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, could the member comment on the important role the government plays in ensuring that seasonal jobs sustain a community in the long term and the short term? Take an industry like tourism or agriculture. If they did not have seasonal jobs, the industries could potentially collapse. There is a role for the government to play.

Does the member believe there is a role for the government to play and to what degree does that role include or incorporate employment insurance?

*Business of Supply*

**Mr. Bev Shipley:** Mr. Speaker, absolutely, our government is playing, and has played, a significant role. One is the clarification of how we help individuals, whether they are looking for full-time or part-time in seasonal jobs, by ensuring they can find out twice a day what job opportunities are out there.

Sometimes we do not have clientele within a working area and we bring in temporary foreign workers. In the agriculture industry and others such as the tourism industry those people are significant to our economy. Therefore, it is a balance. We also know that when people are collecting EI, they have a responsibility to look for a job. That is what we are trying to encourage. One of the best social programs we have in our country is a job.

**Mr. Lawrence Toet (Elmwood—Transcona, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise this afternoon to address the opposition motion.

As many of my colleagues have previously noted, our government cannot support the opposition motion, which uses such hyperbole and fundamentally misunderstands the effects of the changes we are making to the employment insurance system. A key fact for all of these changes is ensuring that Canadians are always better off working than not. This is why we have made much-needed changes to ensure the EI program is working effectively for Canadians.

The NDP are specifically calling for a renewal today of the extra five weeks pilot project in their motion. The pilot project was a temporary measure, aimed at providing five weeks of extra EI benefits to Canadians who were hardest hit during the worst years of the recession. This program was never meant to be permanent. It was introduced nationally by our government in 2008 and renewed in 2010 as part of our economic action plan.

We have seen over 920,000 net new jobs created since July 2009. Canada is in a period of economic recovery. Temporary supports such as the extra five weeks pilot project were allowed to end because of the improvements we have seen in our economy. A few of the regions covered by the pilot project in fact saw so much sustained job growth that they ended the pilot project early. The NDP seems to think that regardless of how many jobs are created or how far we have come in terms of economic recovery, temporary supports such as these must be made permanent.

Our government's top priority is creating jobs and fostering long-term prosperity. A key tool to achieving that goal is an EI system that achieves a balance between providing benefits to those who need them while supporting Canadians as they return to work. Beginning in April we are introducing a new permanent national approach to better align the calculation of EI benefit amounts with regional labour market conditions. This will replace another pilot program called the best 14 weeks pilot.

As of April, the amount a claimant receives per week will be determined using an average of their earnings over their best weeks of employment. In higher unemployment regions, fewer best weeks will be used in this calculation. This will result in a much-higher average if several high-paying weeks are used in the calculation as opposed to all weeks that may include some with little to no income. This change will ensure that workers employed in seasonal industries do not turn down work in the off-season for fear it will decrease the average used to calculate their benefits. In short, this

new variable weeks program will make it more beneficial for workers to accept all available work in slower seasons of employment.

This is yet another example of how our government is looking to balance the EI system. We want to ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not. Unlike previous pilots that were available only in some regions, this countrywide approach ensures that people with similar labour market conditions will have their EI benefits determined in the same manner, regardless of where they live.

Our government is focused on improving programs such as EI, while the NDP would seek to only maintain disincentives to work and also impose a \$21 billion carbon tax on Canadians.

Another improvement that we announced in budget 2012 was the new working while on claim pilot project. Previously only a portion of earnings were exempt from being clawed back. Once earnings exceeded this exemption, EI benefits were clawed back dollar for dollar. The result of this policy was that claimants reduced their labour force attachment by turning down work that exceeded their exemption. This was creating a disincentive to work.

Under the new working while on claim pilot, the clawback is reduced to 50%, starting from the first dollar earned. As claimants search for permanent employment, this new pilot increases the benefit of accepting all available work by allowing them to keep more of what they earn while on EI. For Canadians who feel they were better served under the previous method of calculation, they are able to opt into the old system. Both these measures work toward our government's goal of ensuring that Canadians are always better off working than not. That is how one fosters economic growth, not by imposing new carbon taxes or by maintaining disincentives to work.

● (1220)

Canada's economy is leading the G8 when it comes to job growth. Over 920,000 net new jobs since July 2009 have been created under our watch. We are emerging from the recession far ahead of other developed nations. With new jobs come opportunities. According to Statistics Canada, in the fall there were 268,000 job vacancies across the country. We need to ensure that Canadians are aware of these jobs so that we continue to see sustained economic recovery.

We recognize there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work, particularly in the off-season, in parts of the country where a significant section of the economy is based on seasonal industries. Our government is working to help these Canadians find jobs in their local areas, which are appropriate to their qualifications. For those who are unable to find employment, employment insurance will be there for them, as it always has been.

*Business of Supply*

Personal circumstances, working conditions and hours of work will continue to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. We are making common sense changes to the employment insurance system to ensure that Canadians have the tools and resources they need to find local jobs in their local labour markets, within their skill sets.

It is worth repeating that the opposition motion before us today completely skews the facts and panders to a politics of fear that the opposition has, unfortunately, adopted. These are the politics of political desperation. For this reason I urge all members of the House to join with our government and vote against the motion.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to say to my colleague opposite that he evidently does not read the same papers or watch the same television programs that I do. In my area, people are dissatisfied and concerned.

Today, I am wondering—and that is probably what I will ask him—if he does not clearly see that they miscalculated in terms of communication. Today, the problem is that they tried to include a huge reform in a 700-page mess, when they should have consulted the people. This is a huge issue which we should discuss as a society, as a group. They wanted to include it and, today, there is a terrible backlash.

[*English*]

**Mr. Lawrence Toet:** Mr. Speaker, these are fundamental changes that have been brought forward, but they are needful. They are changes that are helping people find work, and I think that is the part that has been completely misunderstood in this process.

As I mentioned in my speech, there were 268,000 jobs last fall that were unfilled in this country. We are working hard to connect people with those jobs. People look for opportunities to work. We are trying to help them find those opportunities. We are trying to make the system easier for them.

We are setting up job alert systems that will help them connect with jobs in their regions. As we have said all along, we are looking to help them use the skill sets they have to fill jobs that require their skill sets. We are not asking people to take jobs they are unqualified for or unable to do. We are not asking people to travel distances they are unable to travel. We are looking at this on a case-by-case basis, as required and needed.

The ultimate goal here is to connect Canadians with the jobs that are out there. I think that is something everybody fundamentally would like to see happen. Those who are not working would love to have a job. For every unemployed person I have talked to in my riding, their desire is not to collect unemployment; it is to find a job. We are working to help them find those jobs. I cannot see how that cannot be supported across the aisle.

**Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I notice the hon. member opposite had the great courage to bring up the government's 2008 promise to put in a cap and trade system. Is the government going to use money from the EI system to pay for the Conservative cap and trade promise made in the 2008 election?

**Mr. Lawrence Toet:** Mr. Speaker, I mentioned the NDP policy that was clearly articulated in the budget proposals from that party's last election campaign. It is interesting that the member is trying to give us credit for what his party has clearly articulated and brought forward.

We want to have an atmosphere where we create jobs, where there is an opportunity for employers and entrepreneurs to go forward, to grow their businesses, to bring prosperity to this country. That is what will bring forward jobs for everyone. We want to help connect people with the jobs that these entrepreneurs are bringing forward. We do not want to bring forward measures that will set back our entrepreneurs, our small business people, from being able to continue growing in a fashion that would create jobs for Canadians, such as the 920,000 net new jobs that have been created already to this point since 2009.

**Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, our government remains focused on what matters most to Canadians and that is jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. Given the fact that we have created 920,000 net new jobs since July 2009, I would like to ask my hon. friend a simple question. Are measures such as the temporary extra five week pilot project still necessary?

• (1230)

**Mr. Lawrence Toet:** Mr. Speaker, Canadians should be excited that we have come to the point where, after the recession that we went through, the temporary measures that we had to bring forward in 2008 and renew in 2010 can be removed because we have had such a great economic recovery. We are heading in the right direction. Canadians can look at this with great pride and say that we have come a long way and we do not need these temporary measures any further.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would first like to inform you that I will be sharing my time with the member from Sudbury.

I am pleased to rise today on the NDP opposition day to speak to the employment insurance program.

I would like to reread the motion:

That the House call on the government to reverse devastating changes it has made to Employment Insurance which restrict access and benefits, depress wages, push vulnerable Canadians into poverty and download costs to the provinces; and reinstate the Extra Five Weeks pilot project to avoid the impending "black hole" of financial insecurity facing workers in seasonal industries and the regional economies they support.

This debate is timely because the Conference Board of Canada told us this week that rising social and economic inequality in Canada weakens the country's social fabric. It compared the socio-economic data of 17 industrialized countries and ranked Canada 7th for living conditions and the well-being of its population.

Canada under the Conservatives gets a very poor grade when it comes to social inequalities and child poverty. Yet, the employment insurance system, as originally conceived, should act as a tool for the Canadian government to combat inequalities and poverty. However, since the Mulroney government, Conservative and Liberal governments have continued to chip away at employment insurance.



*Business of Supply*

The reforms carried out in the 1990s completely changed the playing field as far as employment insurance is concerned. From that point on, the government no longer participated in the funding of the system. Eligibility rules were changed, benefit levels were reduced, and the number of exclusions rose, which reduced the employment insurance coverage rate to 40%.

As one would expect, the situation is even more precarious for women. Since women often hold part-time, temporary or casual jobs, they quite simply do not accumulate enough hours to qualify for employment insurance. The figures speak for themselves. Only four out of every ten unemployed persons have access to employment insurance, and among women, the figure is three out of every ten.

Since the mid-1990s, the government has dipped into the employment insurance fund to bankroll its everyday spending, robbing workers and businesses that pay premiums of over \$55 billion.

Since the Conservatives won a majority, they have begun to implement their ideological agenda and limit the scope of the employment insurance system. On September 15, for example, they abolished the pilot project covering six regions in Quebec, which was being used to test a five-week extension of regular benefits. The demise of this pilot project will mean many jobless people will, once again, find themselves in a black hole.

Moreover, on April 6, the pilot project whereby benefit rates are based on the best 14 weeks will be abolished, which will result in a substantial loss of income for a number of people in seasonal industry, among other sectors.

Furthermore, in April 2013, the board of referees will be replaced by the social security tribunal. The board, a tribunal of first instance that has proven its worth over time, will be replaced by a tribunal on which only a single government-appointed commissioner will sit.

That said, the most deplorable measure is the repeal of section 27 of the Employment Insurance Act dealing with the definition of unsuitable employment, along with a series of unreasonable constraints for workers in seasonal industries. Because of these provisions, so-called “frequent” claimants, who have filed up to three claims and have received over 60 weeks of benefits in the previous five years will, after a certain period, be forced to accept jobs at 70% of their previous compensation level within one hour of their place of residence.

On this side of the House, we believe that this witch hunt against seasonal workers is motivated by persistent prejudice against the unemployed. Members will recall that the minister who spearheaded the reform is known for her disgraceful remarks regarding the unemployed. In January 2009, she stated, for example, that her government did not want it to be lucrative for the jobless to stay at home and do nothing, as if the unemployed were all lazy.

• (1235)

Last Friday, she again declared that “once again, the NDP is supporting the bad guys”. The unemployed are “bad guys”. Those words are not worthy of the minister responsible for employment insurance.

We also learned last week that Service Canada employees had been mandated to hunt down unemployed people and get back \$40,000 per month. Instead of training her officials to better assist the unemployed and smooth their return to the workforce, the minister is sending her investigators out after them in the hope that she can deprive them of as much money as possible.

Treating honest, unemployed Canadians like criminals is no way to come to grips with the real criminals. The minister is more and more out of touch with the daily reality of Canadians, proving that this tired government, which is constantly on the defensive and has no regard for ethics, is a tired government that must be replaced.

I have spoken at length about the Conservatives' reforms that target seasonal workers, but it is important to point out that entire communities will be decimated. Unlike the shareholders and directors of large corporations who have received tax breaks so that they will reinvest in the economy, the unemployed do not hoard their benefits. They immediately spend them in their communities on their basic needs.

In 2003, the CLC produced an interesting report on the economic impact of employment insurance. The union calculated the annual loss per constituency after the various reforms in the 1990s. The study showed, for example, that the economy in a constituency such as Rivière-des-Mille-Îles was \$44 million per year poorer as a result of the cuts to the benefits paid to the unemployed.

We have to be crystal clear. This regressive reform affects all workers, not just the workers who are the most likely to receive employment insurance benefits. With the economy slowing down and the labour market on its deathbed, all workers may well feel the adverse effects of the reduced benefits.

In recent weeks, I have had the opportunity to meet with residents of Rivière-des-Mille-Îles on this matter. In November, the leader of the NDP also came to the suburbs north of Montreal to meet people there and restate the NDP's commitment to improving the employment insurance program.

Specifically, I had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the 1,000 workers who are laid off each summer by the Seigneurie-des-Mille-Îles school board. They shared their concerns with me. I also saw that the 650 school crossing guards in the city of Montreal issued a press release yesterday to denounce the cuts that this Conservative government has made to employment insurance. Let me read you a passage that sums up their situation:

...crossing guards earn very modest salaries for working four hours a day divided into three shifts. They therefore have to travel six times a day for work. Now, the employment insurance reform will decrease their income and require some of them to accept minimum wage jobs. It is extremely unfair for these men and women, who ensure the safety of children, to be penalized like this.

A survey of 1,000 Rivière-des-Mille-Îles residents conducted last year also showed that there is strong support for the NDP's position on improving the employment insurance program. Fifty percent of those surveyed believe that the current program does not meet the needs of unemployed workers and that changes must be made to better support our workers.

Rather than listening only to his party's ideologues, the Prime Minister should listen to Canadians, who are calling for a more humane and more cost-effective approach.

*Business of Supply*

In closing, I would like to present the NDP's plan for employment insurance, which is an important way of showing the difference between us and the government.

First, the NDP has already announced that it would eliminate the new measures related to seasonal workers. Let us also remember that, during the last election campaign, the NDP formally committed to restoring the integrity of the employment insurance program, as finances permit. We said we would eliminate the two-week waiting period and return the qualifying period to a minimum of 360 hours of work for all regions.

For weeks, we have been seeing major protests throughout Quebec and Canada. I hope that the government paid attention to these heartfelt appeals and that it will cancel the devastating changes to the EI program.

• (1240)

[English]

**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I think it is important to recognize this debate as an opportunity to show that employment insurance has been evolving, including when the name was changed from unemployment insurance in the 1990s.

In fact, the Liberal administration created the employment insurance benefits, recognizing the need to assist those who find themselves unemployed and needing income. It was Pierre Elliott Trudeau who expanded those benefits to include things such as maternity and sick benefits. Even in the last election, former Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff talked about using benefits to provide for those who are providing care for family members.

There are many ideas out there, and history will show that the Liberal Party has been very progressive. We need to recognize employment insurance as a vital social program that needs to continue and needs to be modified so that it can actually fit the needs of Canadians and the economic situations in our country.

I wonder if the member might want to comment.

[Translation]

**Ms. Laurin Liu:** Mr. Speaker, my hon. Liberal colleague can brag about his government's track record but, really, his government's record is horrible. He spoke about changes that were made in 1996. We know that these changes brutally reduced access to employment insurance benefits. Since 1996, between 40% and 50% of applicants have been eligible for employment insurance, while the eligibility rate in the 1970s and 1980s was between 70% and 90%.

Under the Liberals, unemployed workers also saw their access to this program significantly reduced. We also know that the Liberals pillaged the employment insurance fund. Rather than decrease contributions or increase benefits, the Liberals stole \$54 billion from this fund that belongs to the unemployed workers and businesses that contribute to it.

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to hear what the hon. member has to say about the following fact.

We know that wages will drop by 30%, because people will have to accept jobs at 70% of what they earned previously. It is my opinion, and the opinion of many NDP MPs, that this will lead to

lower wages. We think businesses will offer lower wages to employees who would normally take these jobs at a 30% higher wage.

So I would like to know what the member thinks about that. Is she not afraid the country will face a crisis, an economic deflation?

**Ms. Laurin Liu:** Mr. Speaker, that is exactly it. When I went door-to-door in my riding, I saw that everyone was worried about these changes. People know that this will lead to lower wages for everyone.

However, I want to focus on another important point, because I heard my colleagues on the government side brag about their job-creation record. As it stands, there are five unemployed workers for every available job in Canada. So it is not the workers' fault if they cannot find employment. It is the Conservative government's fault, since it has not managed to create enough jobs for Canadians. As I mentioned in my speech, only four out of 10 unemployed workers receive EI benefits. So right there, we can see that it is a very limited program that is not accessible to all workers.

• (1245)

[English]

**Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the government has made it clear that Canadians cannot expect the employment insurance program that they have paid into during and throughout their working lives to be there when they need it.

Cuts to Service Canada have resulted in drastic cuts to EI processing times, meaning that people are not receiving their payments when they are desperately needing them.

If members do not believe me, they should take a look at the statistics of what has happened to EI processing under the Conservatives. Service Canada's own benchmarks state that 80% of all EI applications should receive either a payment or notice of non-payment within 28 days.

Over the past two years, more than one in four applicants have received no response. In western Canada that number rises to one in three. In February 2012, more than half of all respondents still had not heard back from Service Canada within the normal time frame.

What about the EI call centres? In 2007, Service Canada's standard was that 95% of all calls would be answered in 180 seconds. The Conservatives cut this back to 80% in 2008. Yet in 2011-2012, less than a quarter of all calls were answered in 180 seconds.

The Conservatives also significantly weakened the service standards for call-backs from two to five days. Yet only half of call-backs happen within five days. Unfortunately, the cuts in service are not unexpected.

*Business of Supply*

Let us not forget that this is the government in which the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development is more interested in vilifying EI recipients than working out the problems in the system. It is led by a Prime Minister who told the American Council for National Policy that “In terms of the unemployed, of which we have over a million-and-a-half, don't feel particularly bad for many of these people. They don't feel bad about it themselves, as long as they're receiving generous social assistance and unemployment insurance”.

The government's message is essentially that unemployed people are at fault for being unemployed.

Let me give an example from my own community as to why this view is shortsighted. In my community of Sudbury, even a relatively modest change in the price of nickel on the international markets can have a dramatic effect on the job market. If the price rises, companies of course look to expand and the demand for jobs outstrips supply. However, if the price drops, expansion, research and development can be put on hold, and suddenly very qualified individuals find themselves out of work due to no fault of their own.

It is precisely because of these types of swings and changes in the employment patterns that EI is important not only for the individuals who receive it but for the communities as a whole.

Most important, EI is an insurance program. It is a separate fund from other government revenues, and it is designed to provide temporary financial assistance to Canadians in specific circumstances: unemployed Canadians who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own, as well as those who are sick or pregnant, as well as those who must care for a family member who is seriously ill with a significant risk of death.

The very nature of these situations means that delays in receiving funds, which Canadians are legitimately authorized to access, can cause significant hardship.

I talked with some of my colleagues earlier about how an individual in the riding of one of them had to wait over a year and a half, losing his home and then having to sleep on a couch with his family in another home. I could give examples from my own riding of Sudbury.

I talked earlier about a young man in his late twenties standing outside my office door at 7 o'clock in the morning to make sure that he would find one of my staff or myself, because he had been waiting since November, and this was in January, to find out whether or not he qualified for EI. All he wanted was the phone call. He is worried about how he will put food on the table this week for his family.

This is atrocious. We need to ensure that Canadians who have relied on this system can access these funds to ensure they are keeping their homes and feeding their families. Unfortunately, the changes being made by the Conservative government are in complete disregard of any of this.

•(1250)

I have also talked with CP rail workers in my community. They work hard all summer and fall and rely on the EI system to get them through the winter. All of this is changing.

One of the workers mentioned to me that every year at this time he shuts off his Internet service to make sure he can make ends meet. However, because he is shutting off his Internet service, he is now concerned that he will not qualify, with all of the new rules and regulations that the Conservatives are putting forward, because he needs to be able to accept two emails a day on these job postings. He said: “If I can't afford Internet, what am I supposed to do? EI is being cut back and now they're punishing me for trying to save money to put food on the table.”

The whole system that the Conservatives have brought forward has become ridiculous. None of it is supporting Canadian workers who have lost their job through no fault of their own, but is just coming forward on an ideology.

What explicitly are New Democrats asking for with this motion? We are asking for five simple changes that will make life much fairer for Canadians. First, reinstate the extra five weeks pilot project. Second, remove the new definitions of reasonable search and suitable employment for EI claimants. Third, reverse the changes to the working while on claim pilot project. Fourth, reinstate the EI appeal tribunal process. Fifth, reverse the cuts to Service Canada, which are leading to increased processing times.

I will talk a little about each of these statements.

The extra five weeks program granted an extended EI benefit for up to five additional weeks to Canadians living in regions with high unemployment, which unfortunately would include my area of Sudbury. This extra five weeks meant that eligible workers could receive up to 50 weeks of employment insurance benefits.

I do not know if members know anybody who gets an EI cheque, but it is not a lucrative living, as the minister has said. When they are taking these extra five weeks, it is to make sure there is food on the table and the bills are paid. They are not living the high life. By scrapping this, the Conservatives are again punishing Canadians in regions that have high unemployment.

As I mentioned, the extra five weeks for eligible workers who could receive 50 weeks is a program that has helped 313,000 workers in 2010-11 by preventing a gap in income for seasonal workers between the end of EI benefits and the start of their employment season. The program replaced another pilot project started in 2004, and its cancellation means that 2013 will be the first year since then that there will be no extra weeks to benefit available workers in high unemployment regions. This change will push many families into financial crisis, and businesses are worried that the cancellation of the program will force seasonal workers to move, depriving areas of highly skilled workers and exacerbating regional divides in Canada.

*Business of Supply*

This is something that is so true in northern Ontario and in Sudbury. I know my colleague from Nickel Belt could speak to this as well. We are in constant need of skilled workers up in Sudbury. We bring them in and then we create programs like this that send them off to other areas. We really need a stable EI program, and those are the things we are talking about in the five recommendations that we have brought forward.

The definition of reasonable search and suitable employment means that unemployed Canadians will be forced to accept jobs paying up to 30% less than their previous position, driving down wages for all Canadians. Let us not even talk about income equality. We need a whole other debate to talk about that, but this continues to drive that whole piece down.

Service Canada would also force claimants to drive an hour outside of their own community to find work. In northern Ontario, between Sudbury and Espanola or Sudbury and Sturgeon Falls, there is absolutely no public transportation, but that is within the one-hour time frame. Therefore, if there is a job in either of these communities, or vice versa, from Espanola to Sturgeon Falls back into Sudbury, how are workers expected to get there, especially in winter? We only have two-lane highways in Sudbury and they get dangerous. We want to ensure the safety of all Canadians, not put more people on the road to try to take a job that pays them less and that does not even help their family.

The changes that the Conservatives are proposing are actually detrimental to Canadians, and I am proud to stand up and talk to this motion today.

• (1255)

**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I want to pick up on the member's point when he talks about the Service Canada cuts, because that has had a very profound impact on a wide variety of services. There is no doubt about that. What makes the delay in processing employment insurance so critical is that, at the end of the day, our constituents continue to pay bills. Those do not stop because of lengthier processing.

The government needs to be more sensitive to the fact that it is not acceptable to have these untimely delays. They have far-reaching ramifications for such things as the ability to pay bills and put food on the table, to which the member made reference. The government should make it a priority to make sure these offices are adequately staffed, so that cheques can be issued in a more timely fashion, so that we do not have people waiting, indefinitely, it seems at times. If they are waiting for money, it does feel like an indefinite period of time from their perspective.

**Mr. Glenn Thibeault:** Mr. Speaker, the member is bang on in his analogy. When we have a government that continues to drive through omnibus budget bills that continue to cut the services that Canadians rely on, this is what we get. When we have ministers saying they are only cutting in the back rooms but we actually see front-line staff and services disappear, this is what we get. Canadians are suffering because of it, and EI changes are actually making people wait months and, in extreme cases, years.

That is completely unacceptable, because it is Canadians who are paying into EI to ensure they have insurance if that unfortunate time comes. They are making sure they can provide for their families and

if, unfortunately, they lose their job and they need to turn to EI, they find that the system is disappearing under the Conservatives.

**Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, my colleague from Sudbury is certainly correct in his analysis of skilled labour in Northern Ontario. However, I am going to ask him a different question, one on tourism.

He has tourism in his riding, as do I in my riding. There is a tourism resort in the French River area, and I remember last summer the owner was having a lot of problems getting seasonal workers. It gets tougher and tougher to get seasonal workers sometimes. The community of Killarney relies on tourism. It is the only thing they have there.

I would like my hon. colleague from Sudbury to explain to the members across the way what these changes are going to do to places like the French River area and Killarney that rely on tourism.

**Mr. Glenn Thibeault:** Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague and also my neighbouring MP. His riding surrounds Sudbury. It is like the donut and the Timbit, but we do share a lot of things hand in hand, especially when it comes to tourism. In northern Ontario, Sudbury and Nickel Belt, we have really worked hard at establishing that we are a tourism destination, from Science North to the great Ramsey Lake, right in the city, to Killarney and the French River.

We do things every year in our community to talk about bringing folks up to northern Ontario, up to Sudbury. We have been successful with it. We have had businesses opening and succeeding. However, unfortunately, what has happened now is that these seasonal workers who we have been able to bring up cannot stay in northern Ontario, because we continue to have policies brought forward by the government that actually change the way they can survive when it is not tourism season in northern Ontario. What we have seen is that great people come up, and we have started things and have been very successful at them, but then they have to leave because the government does not identify the importance of supporting seasonal workers from tourism to forestry, to even school bus drivers and crossing guards.

This whole system we have established can be beneficial, but unfortunately the Conservatives are changing it to make it the complete opposite.

• (1300)

**Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time today with the Minister of Veterans Affairs. I am pleased to rise and speak to this opposition motion on employment insurance. Most importantly, I am also pleased to address some of the misguided, misinformed and politically motivated messages that have been put forward by members of the opposition and big unions in an attempt to mislead Canadians about what the EI changes will do.

As the member of Parliament for Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, I know how sensitive the topic of EI changes is. It is unfortunate that some opposition parties have intended to exaggerate what these changes mean, and are trying to do with fear what they could not do with reason during the last election, that is, getting more votes.

*Business of Supply*

The changes our government has made to EI aim to ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not working. Quite simply, by accepting a reasonable job under the new definition, Canadians will actually increase their income from what they would collect on EI.

The extra five weeks pilot project that the NDP members refer to in their opposition motion today was a temporary measure aimed at providing extra EI benefits to those Canadians who were hardest hit during the darkest days of the recession. The pilot project was always intended to be temporary.

Since the dark days of the recession, we have seen over 920,000 net new jobs created in Canada. Canada is on a road to sustained economic recovery. Ninety per cent of those jobs are full time; 75% are in the private sector. These are good, well-paying jobs for Canadians. Indeed, there are more jobs coming. Statistics Canada reports that in the fall there were 268,000 job vacancies across this country. As we know, in Nova Scotia and Atlantic Canada, with our new shipbuilding contract, there are economic opportunities ahead of us for all areas of the Maritimes and Atlantic Canada, not just Halifax.

Employers across Canada have made it clear that there is a significant skills and labour shortage, and that is why it is so important that we help Canadians connect with those employers. That is why our government is investing in connecting Canadians with jobs in their local labour markets. We want to ensure that Canadians always have the first crack at Canadian jobs by helping them connect to those available jobs before foreign workers can be brought in from other lands.

This will help us address the growing skills and labour shortage in Canada by helping Canadians who want to work get back to work. At the same time, we recognize that there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work, particularly in parts of the country where the economy is still based on seasonal industries. This is also why we have invested heavily in skills and training to ensure that Canadians have the skills and training they need to gain employment in the marketplace.

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

These improvements are only the most recent in a series of economic action plan measures introduced by our government to support jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. One of the programs that helped us achieve this economic success is the work-sharing program. It has helped both employees and employers alike to endure the rockier parts of our economic recovery.

Through the economic action plan, our Conservative government has made the work-sharing program more accessible, and extended it to help minimize the effects of the economic downturn on Canadian companies and their employees, companies like Stanfield's in my home town of Truro that used the work-sharing program to keep many employees at work and its factory open in the darkest days of the recession.

This program works by helping businesses avoid temporary layoffs when elements beyond their control force a reduction in the

regular level of activity at the business. If workers agree to a reduced work while their employer recovers, they may receive EI benefits, effectively allowing two or three workers to share one job. This allows employers to retain their skilled and experienced employees and avoid the costly process of recruiting and training new employees when business levels return to normal.

This program is a win-win proposition both for the employers, who rely on the experienced hands of their long-term workers, and the employees who are able to keep their jobs and maintain their skills and training.

We also want to better align the calculation of weekly EI benefits with local labour market conditions. As of April, the amount a claimant receives per week will be determined using an average of their earnings over their best weeks of employment. In higher unemployment regions, fewer best weeks will be used in this calculation. This will result in much-higher average earnings if several high-paying weeks are used in the calculation, as opposed to all the weeks, which may include some weeks with little or no income.

● (1305)

This change will ensure that workers employed in seasonal industries do not turn down work in the off-season for fear it will decrease the average used to calculate their benefits. No more will this system be a detriment to someone taking a job.

In short, this new variable weeks program will make it more beneficial for workers to accept all available work in slower employment seasons. It is another example of how our government is looking to balance the EI system. We want to ensure that Canadians are always better off working than not working. Unlike the divisive policies of the NDP that try to pit one region of Canada against another, our government believes in programs like work sharing that are equally available across Canada.

We know that Canadians are eager and willing to put their skills to work in the over 920,000 net new jobs that have been created since July 2009 and we know that Canadians do not want the \$21 billion carbon tax imposed on them by the NDP. That would be on top of a \$3.8 billion in proposed new annual spending on the EI program, spending that would be paid out of the pockets of hard-working Canadians and small businesses, who would have to pay up to 15% more a year in premiums, a cost they could little afford in these fragile economic times.

*Business of Supply*

Our economic action plan is showing results. The measures we have introduced to support job growth and long-term prosperity have given us the strongest growth numbers in the G7. This is why our government is removing the disincentives to work that existed within the former EI system to ensure that we can match Canadians with available jobs in their local labour markets appropriate to their skill sets. It bears repeating that should jobs not be available in someone's local area, the employment insurance system will continue to be available. It always has been.

As a member of Parliament from Atlantic Canada, I want to assure my constituents that the personal circumstances of any EI claimant will be taken into account when determining suitable employment for them. As a member from Nova Scotia, I urge my fellow Atlantic MPs to stop the fearmongering and support the economic action plan that is delivering results for Canadians in all corners of our country, including Atlantic Canada, and to please vote against today's opposition motion.

[*Translation*]

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, my question is for the member from Nova Scotia.

The government is increasingly using employment insurance as a tax to pay for certain things that have nothing to do with the program. I am just telling it like it is.

What is it for? People take out home insurance because in the winter it gets cold and pipes freeze. It would be like telling them that their insurance is no longer valid in December, January and February. But for the rest of the year, the insurance is valid. That is what is being done with EI. The people who need it most are being excluded and are ending up in that famous black hole. They are being told that there are no more benefits. The government is cutting off people when they need it most.

Could the member explain that, because his constituents are not too happy.

[*English*]

**Mr. Scott Armstrong:** Mr. Speaker, our government is supporting workers across this country and we are supporting workers in Atlantic Canada. In addition to making these EI changes to remove the disincentive to people going to work, we are actually transferring billions of dollars to the provinces for skills and training upgrades. This is in addition to the changes we have made to EI. In short, we are supporting workers to get a job, and we are supporting workers who cannot find a job to get the training they need to get that job.

Our government stands behind workers and EI is always there for someone, particularly in the rural areas with high seasonal employment like tourism. The only job that people will be asked to take is one that exists in their community, within their skill set and in their salary range. We are going to connect them to those jobs. This policy is good policy for Atlantic Canada and it is good policy for the rest of the country.

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I am quite interested in the hon. member's suggestion that this is good policy for Atlantic Canada. I am sure that the voters in his riding would be very impressed by his spirited defence of the EI reforms. People are

not so pleased about them in Prince Edward Island, where we have a higher percentage of frequent users of the system than any other province, as we are dependent on tourism, agriculture and fishing as our three main industries.

My question relates to the downloading of the costs of the poverty that will result from these changes. People are going to get knocked off the EI rolls and onto the welfare rolls. I would like the member to outline the steps that have been taken to consult with provincial governments. I can tell the member that in Prince Edward Island, the governing Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives are dead set against the policies of the federal government with respect to this issue. Therefore, I want to know what consultations took place with Atlantic Canadian provincial governments before implementing these changes.

• (1310)

**Mr. Scott Armstrong:** Mr. Speaker, the difference between us and some of the opposition parties when it comes to building the economy in Atlantic Canada is that we want to build an economy on jobs and growth. That is why we are investing in shipbuilding. That is why we gave the loan guarantee to the lower Churchill, Muskrat Falls project. We are going to build and create jobs in Atlantic Canada. We want an economy in Atlantic Canada that is not based on the EI system but on jobs and growth, real jobs so that people can work and support their families.

Anyone who encourages seasonal employees not to take a job available in their own area and that meets their own personal circumstances is not doing them any favours, because when seasonal employees draw EI they are not contributing to their CPP and their employer is not contributing to CPP.

I want to know what that party will do about seniors' poverty. A lot of people who have not had the opportunity to work in the off season will have a lower CPP benefit when they retire. It is always better to be working than not working. It is always better to get a cheque, because that way not only is personal income being built, but also the CPP benefit for the future. That is something I have not heard many opposition members talk about.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I would like first to congratulate my colleague from Nova Scotia, the member for Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, on having generated wealth and employment in Nova Scotia and in the Atlantic provinces.

I would like in turn to comment on the motion respecting employment insurance changes introduced in the House by the member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, and to express clearly my disagreement with the NDP's position on the issue.

*Business of Supply*

The employment insurance plan is the most important Canadian program devoted to the labour market, and Canadians rely on it to assist them financially when they are temporarily out of work and are looking for a job. I have myself received employment insurance benefits. It is a useful and necessary program for all working people.

We know that those who remain active in the labour market are more likely to find permanent work more quickly. Permanent jobs are what provides stability and makes it possible to improve living conditions for Canadian families and Canadian regions. There is no doubt that most Canadians want to work, and are actively looking for employment while receiving employment insurance benefits. That is one of the principles of the system.

The changes we are making to the employment insurance plan are necessary to ensure that it remains fair and efficient. One of the goals is to help workers find jobs more quickly, preserve jobs and ensure that Canadian workers have more money in their pockets.

The measures we announced in the 2012 economic action plan are ensuring that the employment insurance plan is now better suited to Canadians' needs, more flexible and more equitable. They also ensure that the plan helps Canadians stay active in the labour market, and find employment more quickly. How? Members will agree with me that it does not make sense for employment insurance claimants to be looking for work, on the one hand, for jobs to be available, and for those concerned not to speak to each other. That is what the new measures introduced by our minister are bringing about, in every part of the country.

We are proposing and putting in place a better way of connecting Canadians with job opportunities in their local area. We have also clarified the responsibilities of claimants while they are receiving regular employment insurance benefits. For example, we realized that some people have difficulty in finding a job, or in seeing what jobs are available in their region. Sometimes they are unaware that their skills, particularly those of seasonal workers, which are remarkable, could meet the needs of other industries during the off-season.

That is why we undertook to enable Canadians receiving regular employment insurance benefits to receive daily notification of job offers from various sources in their region, in order to assist their job search.

We have also provided clear definitions in the regulations for "suitable employment" and "reasonable job search." We believe these clarifications reinforce the responsibilities of claimants receiving regular benefits and will help them in their active job search, in order to accept suitable employment.

Contrary to what the opposition claims, we have no thought whatever of compelling people to accept jobs for which they do not have the skills—we are dealing here with the kind of urban myths perpetuated by the opposition—or asking them move to another part of the country, or accept underpaid work, as some people have wrongly claimed.

This is about clarifying claimants' responsibility when receiving EI benefits and sticking to clear parameters. The new and enhanced job alert system has been introduced to provide Canadians with better, more relevant information on employment.

The employment insurance system to which workers and employers contribute is designed to provide temporary income support. It is not designed to provide an income supplement when people choose not to work. That goes without saying and everyone knows that.

It is important to note that those who do not manage to find work will still be able to rely on the employment insurance program. Again, those who are not able to find work can still count on the EI system.

In our desire to better connect Canadians with available jobs, we have also improved coordination between the EI system and the temporary foreign worker program.

• (1315)

It is very simple, and the objective is clear. We just want employers to consider hiring Canadians before foreign workers, and we want foreign workers to be hired where we need them most. Let us first meet our needs with Canadian workers, and then let us get additional help abroad, if necessary. This is just common sense. It is a sensible and reasonable measure. Let us first offer Canadian jobs to our own workers. Then, if necessary, we can turn to foreign workers.

We have also adopted a new Canada-wide method to calculate EI benefits, so that people living in regions with similar labour market conditions can be eligible for the same benefits. We are talking about fairness for all regions of the country and a flexible system that takes into consideration the employment insurance rate.

That is why we are convinced that these new initiatives, which are being implemented, will help more Canadians find work, and will put more money in workers' pockets. These measures will provide greater support to people looking for work. A daily report will inform them of available jobs in their region. In addition, as I mentioned, thanks to these measures people will have more money if they work than if they merely collect EI benefits.

Our government is committed to making targeted and sensible changes to the EI system, for the benefit of Canadians and the whole country. I hope opposition members will support our efforts to connect available jobs with workers who are looking for work. This will create wealth and prosperity in all our regions, particularly in areas that are so dear to us, like Lévis—Bellechasse and Les Etchemins.

**Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I listened very closely to the member for Lévis—Bellechasse. What would he say to the people from out east, to the women who want to go work as cleaners in Fort McMurray, where the men have gone? They are being told that there is no work, yet temporary foreign workers are being brought in from the Philippines, China and other countries. People from eastern Canada want to go work there, but they are being told that there is nothing there, that they cannot go. What would he say to those people?

*Business of Supply*

What would he say to the scaffolder who called me yesterday? He wanted to go work in Alberta, but he cannot because companies there have hired Americans. Our people cannot go work there. What would he say to those people?

What would he say to the woman out east who this morning was visited by an employee from Human Resources and Skills Development Canada who was delivering some forms and who told her that if she did not try to find a job by 1 p.m. the next day, he would see her in his office and take away her employment insurance benefits? What would he say to those people?

I would like to hear from the member for Lévis—Bellechasse, who says that the government is doing such wonderful work and that the Conservatives are there to help people find jobs. But really, they are there to cut people's employment insurance. That is what they are doing.

• (1320)

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Acadie—Bathurst for his question. It gives me an opportunity to clarify an extremely important point that I referred to earlier: the urban legends being spread by the opposition.

What must be understood is that in every case, it must always be to the worker's advantage. Take a seasonal worker during the off-season. It must always be to the worker's advantage to be out working rather than drawing benefits. That means that we take the costs of travel, gasoline and vehicle expenses into account. We also look at whether or not the person has a vehicle.

Judgment must be exercised. Unfortunately, the opposition would like to take people from the Magdalen Islands and send them to Gaspé, and so on. That is not a good idea. It is time we had a reasonable, sensible debate, in order to match workers to the jobs that exist in each region.

At present in Lévis—Bellechasse and Les Etchemins, the unemployment rate is among the lowest in Quebec and comparable to that in Calgary and Edmonton. Still, we have to ensure that our seasonal workers can take advantage of these opportunities and keep more money in their pockets.

[*English*]

**Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I indicated in my earlier question that Prince Edward Island primarily has a seasonal economy. There are some good-paying, permanent jobs that some people are fortunate enough to have. Some of them are at the national headquarters of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Excuse me for commenting on the irony of being able to talk to the Minister of Veterans Affairs about employment insurance, given that many of the employees within his department, as part of this downsizing, may find themselves having to avail themselves of that program. As the House may know, the cuts to the civil service in my riding and in my province are double what they are in the rest of the country.

My question relates to dealing with the people who are now on employment insurance who have to go to Service Canada. The minister is closing district offices, is downsizing Veterans Affairs and is telling the veterans to go to Service Canada. We are gutting the EI system and are telling those on EI to go to Service Canada.

In Prince Edward Island, Service Canada is being cut from 113 front-line employees to 61. How will these people be able to serve the increased needs of the veterans and the increased number of people seeking employment when the actual number of front-line workers in Service Canada is being cut by 46% in my province?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Steven Blaney:** Mr. Speaker, whether the topic is employment insurance or reduction in spending to achieve efficient service, the opposition keeps getting tangled up in urban legends.

Allow me to repeat a point. One of the great resources of this country is its efficient, effective public service. I am proud to lead a department with the majority of its employees located in Charlottetown. It is a proven model of decentralized management. I can assure the House that we take care to see that our public servants are treated well. In the coming years, through the natural process of attrition, a number of them will retire. That is part of our forecast reduction in spending.

As for employment insurance and Service Canada, Prince Edward Island has a number of Service Canada offices, and veterans can also access these services. We believe that the various departments of the government should not work separately, but should work together. That is why Service Canada is able to offer front-line services to veterans in more than 600 locations across the country.

**Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would first like to say that I will be sharing my time with the member for Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques.

The reform we are looking at starts out very badly. It starts by denying the geographic, demographic and social facts of life in Canada. If we had a uniform country, like a kind of great plain with the same resources distributed uniformly across it, this reform might work very well, but Canada is made up of more variety than that.

There is also the historical aspect. When Canada was created, the Canadian west was a vast empty space with a pile of buffalo bones and subsistence farming. What financed the construction of the transcontinental railway and the development of the west were the economy and the banks of Halifax and Montreal. They monopolized whatever savings and capital there were for 50 years, so that the rest of Canada, Ontario and the west, could be developed.

Now that the shoe is on the other foot, it no longer works. It seemed to me that there was an agreement, that the wealth would be shared from one end of the country to the other and there would be some degree of mutual support. It would appear that phase has come to an end.

In addition, this reform does not have the unanimous support of Canadians, at least if I go by what I hear from my constituents. In fact, I cannot really repeat what they said here, because I would have to set parliamentary language aside. No one is happy with this reform, because it does not stand up for a second. It is absurd and inconsistent.



*Business of Supply*

The best comparison I can make when I look at the minister to whom this reform has been assigned is that it is as if someone wanted to send a milk wagon horse out wearing blinkers to run the barrel race at the Calgary Stampede. It does not make any sense. The government has to start realizing how big a mistake it has made.

For months now, absolutely no one has come to me and said that the government was right in proposing this reform and that the system needed to be put in order because some people were abusing it. I have never heard anyone say that. People are starting to organize seriously. I have received letters and resolutions from municipalities in my riding asking me to speak up and protest against this reform. It is not just unemployed people who will be directly affected; employers, municipalities and entire regions will be as well. This will result in a loss of expertise.

For example, a person who works maintaining the trails at Mont Tremblant has to stop when the snow starts to melt. I have another example: a young father wrote to me. He is a technician who works on boats and personal watercraft. When the season ends, he works for a few weeks doing maintenance and storing boats for the winter. In the spring, it starts up again. He works on preparations for the upcoming season. In between, he would have to take a chainsaw to the lake to open it up. Reality is sometimes tedious, but we have to face it.

• (1325)

Members on the other side of the House need to get used to doing this.

The minister spoke earlier of information about employment being available online. That is all well and good, but in certain areas in my riding, there is no high-speed Internet. The limited Internet service only works very early in the morning and around dinnertime. Outside these periods, it is impossible to receive or send e-mail. Before overhauling the system and automating the services, the Conservatives should at least ensure that people have access to the Internet.

There is also the question of an acceptable distance between a person's home and place of employment. If a person lives 80 km from the nearest major road, has to travel on dangerous roads and share the road with convoys of forestry trucks, it is not easy. When it is -30 or -35 °C, it is important to have a reliable vehicle with good tires. Generally speaking, that is not the kind of vehicle that unemployed persons drive.

The money in the employment insurance fund does not belong to the government. It belongs to workers and employers. It is a fund to which businesses and employees contribute. It is intended to help people get through the toughest periods of their lives. The government is now making these periods even tougher by imposing an increasing number of constraints.

In the long term, when an individual reaches the end of the road, so to speak, he will be forced to accept a job that pays 30% less, and if he changes jobs a second time, his income would drop a further 30%; where will it end? Do the Conservatives intend to do away with the minimum wage?

Earlier, the minister spoke of the availability of workers for agricultural jobs. It is certainly true that these jobs should be offered

to Canadians ahead of foreign workers, but what will happen if, every year, an employer brings in workers from Central America to pick strawberries and there is unemployment in his region? Will he still be able to have them come? There is much ambiguity around this. This kind of ambiguity only leads to more questions. It results in insecurity and uncertainty.

Will the Conservatives reveal their intentions and tell Canadians whether or not they have a plan?

• (1330)

**Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, we have heard many things said today. The Conservatives have said, among other things, that our perception constitutes an urban myth.

I am sorry, but when a minister states that the unemployed are the “bad guys”, that is not an urban myth. It is a reality. When a minister from the Maritime provinces says that the unemployed are people who take advantage of their period of unemployment to go hunting and fishing, it is not an urban myth: it is an insult.

When another minister tells us to our faces that people are essentially frauds, and we have to hire inspectors and ask them to cut \$40,000 a month in employment insurance benefits, I am sorry, but we are no longer dealing with urban myths. We are dealing with the truth. It is not us who are dividing workers. It is they who are deciding that the unemployed are no longer workers, but frauds. It is they who are deciding that the Maritime provinces are populated only by people who do not want to work. The reality is that we have gone from 1 million unemployed to 1.4 million unemployed. That is a reality of their economics.

I would like the member to tell us the truth clearly, and why people are not working. It is quite simply because there are no jobs.

• (1335)

**Mr. Marc-André Morin:** Mr. Speaker, there is a reality that the people opposite refuse to see. People have been settled in some regions and parts of the country for hundreds of years. They have developed a way of life that has enabled them to establish communities, build cities and organize a complete social life.

For years, the country has benefited from these people's efforts. Life was good when cod sold for good prices in Britain, and Newfoundland exported tons of cod to Europe. It generated revenue for Canada.

However, the destruction of the industry by the federal government generated thousands of unemployed. Now that the market is shrinking, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the regions. We must not abandon specific regions, but should continue to support them so that they can develop economic alternatives.

**Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, before the holidays, *Le Devoir* published an article—with evidence to support it—that exposed the government's plan to use this reform to cut funding for 8,000 claimants who are currently receiving employment insurance. The government was also anticipating savings of \$30 million to \$35 million a year.

The government's objectives with this reform are clear, even though the Conservatives claim that they are trying to help employers find workers and vice versa.

*Business of Supply*

At the end of the day, one of the primary goals of the reform is to deny benefits to claimants who have made their contributions and who, under the old system, would have been entitled to benefits.

I would like to hear what my colleague from Laurentides—Labelle has to say about this article that revealed the Conservative government's plan.

**Mr. Marc-André Morin:** Mr. Speaker, an article like that makes it easy to believe. Everything always comes back to the economy and alleged job creation. I say “alleged”, because 15% of young people who are unemployed are not in the mood to brag or boast.

This is obviously a hidden and vicious attack on certain regions of the country where the Conservatives may not have gotten very good political support.

**Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP)** Mr. Speaker, do the words “Notre région au pouvoir” ring a bell with you? That was the Conservative Party's slogan in Quebec during the 2011 election. When we look at the employment insurance reform that is being imposed on the regions of Quebec, we see that they—particularly the one that I have the honour and privilege of representing—are being directly attacked and are going to pay a high price.

In my region, a major movement is currently underway. People are aware of the consequences of employment insurance reform and they can see its negative effects. We have seen demonstrations on the Magdalen Islands, in the Gaspé, in the Lower St. Lawrence, along the upper north shore and the lower north shore, in Charlevoix and in the Maritimes. People are rising up because they know what this reform will mean for their communities, for their economy and for the future of their regions.

Despite all the noise that the government is trying to make and all the confusion it is trying to spread about the reform, there are two main reasons why the Conservatives have imposed this employment insurance reform.

First, it is true that there is a labour shortage in some regions of the country, in some communities and in some sectors, especially in Alberta. We recognize that. But reforming employment insurance in an attempt to better connect those looking for jobs and employers through policies will apply from coast to coast to coast is about the worst way imaginable of attaining that goal. In my opinion, it is the least effective, the least efficient way of going about it.

The second goal that the Conservatives had in mind—and it is clearly spelled out in the article I mentioned just now—is to shorten the list of those who can claim employment insurance benefits. People may have paid into the program for years, but the government is trying to make them ineligible for employment insurance. The government even came right out and said that it was hoping to save \$35 million per year. Would it actually be saving money? No, that is money contributed by employers and employees, money that will be taken away from the claimants who need it when they are unemployed.

This idea of restricting EI eligibility is the crux of the issue, and it was once again exposed last Friday in *Le Devoir*. The article referred to the quotas imposed on Service Canada employees. They are being asked to find annual “savings” of \$40,000. Of course, the main

purpose was to eliminate fraudsters in our society. That is absolutely right.

However, when the government imposes quotas, when it asks every employee to find savings of \$40,000, and when it imposes new EI eligibility rules, it is no longer fighting fraudsters who should not be collecting EI benefits. Rather, it is trying to find a way to exclude perfectly eligible and legitimate claimants, based on purely technical criteria or even mistakes.

The government might argue that these people have access to an appeal process if they are erroneously denied EI benefits. Let us talk about this appeal process. Until now, we had boards of referees made up of some 800 employees, many working part-time. Each board was familiar with the realities of its regional economy. However, as of next April, these boards of referees will no longer exist. The government is replacing them with a social security tribunal that will deal not only with employment insurance, but also with pensions and other federal benefits.

Under the board of referees system—which worked relatively well—one could file an appeal and a decision would be issued within a month. Therefore, a legitimate claimant could receive his benefits one month after appealing.

In the case of the social security tribunal, which will employ only 70 people across the country, a legitimate claimant may have to wait up to eight months before getting his due. Can an EI claimant afford to wait eight months before receiving his benefits? This shows how the Conservative approach to the EI issue is totally out of touch with reality, particularly the reality of our regions, because this is very much about them.

• (1340)

Despite the efforts that have been made, some of them in eastern Quebec, which I am honoured to represent and where the economy has been greatly diversified compared to conditions there 10 or 15 years ago, a large part of the economy still relies on seasonal work. I am choosing my words carefully. We are not talking about seasonal workers, but seasonal work. Since we are in a resource-based region, this work is mostly in the tourism, agriculture, fishery and forestry sectors. That is the reality in our regions.

At the moment, the Conservative government—for its own purposes—is completely disrupting and overturning the way our economy operates. It is doing that through its EI reforms. If the government wants to debate diversification of regional economies, we are ready. We should hold that debate here in the House, and the Quebec National Assembly could hold one, too. Still, the government never mentions regional economic diversification; it prefers to operate within the employment insurance system, which should be providing insurance benefits to claimants and taking our regional reality into account.

*Business of Supply*

It is not just rural regions that are affected. Urban areas also should be alert to the effects of this reform. While the resource-based regions may depend on tourism, agriculture, fisheries and forestry, other sectors are also deeply affected by this reform. For example, construction workers often work on three- to eight-month contracts. At the end of a contract, because of a weak real estate market or slow housing starts, they may find themselves without work for several months as they wait for their next contract.

During the two to four months they are unemployed, they must search for work, perhaps outside the construction sector, depending on their qualifications, even though they are looking for jobs in construction. If they live in an urban area, they will have to do five job searches per week to qualify for benefits. Even though they are actively searching for employment in construction, no such jobs exist.

We can think of other fields, such as teaching, where substitute teachers may have contracts for three to five months, then have to wait a month or two before getting their next contract. They are asked to apply for three to five jobs a week in fields that may not be their own. They may be offered a job for which they may be qualified but that offers 70% of the salary of their previous job, and that may well be a job in sales, fast food or retail. They may be offered a job that does not interest them, and for which they have no particular training, but that they would be suited for because it is a job requiring lesser skills than a bachelor's or master's degree in education. These people are still looking for a job in education, but there are none. They may have to accept a job in a completely different field or risk losing their benefits.

I can name some other fields that affect urban areas, such as the arts and film sectors, where people often work on contract and can wind up unemployed for weeks or months, and not for lack of looking for a new contract. They may be forced to take a job outside their field, but one that they may be qualified for and will have to accept.

This reform makes no sense. What I have also seen, and what people realize when I say this reform makes no sense, is the make-up of the demonstrations and movements we are seeing in eastern Quebec. Claimants, the workers, are not the only ones rising up; there are also employers, whose workforce, often trained at high cost, may leave the region because of economic insecurity.

Employers also suffer productivity losses. If claimants are required to conduct three to five job searches a week, imagine the number of unsolicited employment applications employers receive and nevertheless have to go through. Those resources would be put to much better use helping expand those businesses.

In my view, the minister clearly has no idea of the actual situation in our regions. She has no idea of the disruptions this reform will cause in regions such as eastern Quebec, and she has no idea of the negative impact this will have on regional economies.

With that, I will be pleased to answer any questions.

• (1345)

**Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, first I would like to congratulate my colleague and the members from neighbouring regions for the excellent work they have done to help

people mobilize and to defend their interests, both on the ground and in the House.

At the end of his speech, he talked about who takes part in demonstrations. It is an interesting point that he should expand on. In fact yesterday, during question period, I heard a Conservative minister ask who the member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine was talking about when he referred to the demonstrations. It is as if the Conservatives had not realized just how mobilized and angry people were.

When he said that the minister in question had no idea what was going on, it is that kind of comment that makes us realize just how much the government does not realize what is happening here, particularly in Quebec, but elsewhere as well, such as in New Brunswick, for example.

So I would like to let him talk more about these people, who are afraid but also mobilized. He could also talk about the fact that they are not frauds, as is being implied. These are actual communities, people from all walks of life.

I would appreciate it if he could expand on that.

**Mr. Guy Caron:** Mr. Speaker, it will be a pleasure.

The movement is indeed highly diversified. People know what it means when we talk about reform. Yes, claimants and even workers who are currently employed are involved. Employers are too because they risk losing their workforce, which in many cases has been trained at high cost. However, as a result of the economic insecurity and obligations that the government has imposed under the employment insurance reform and that have nothing to do with the actual situation in the region, those employees will definitely consider leaving the region.

There is also the issue of productivity losses that I mentioned in relation to all the unsolicited job applications that will be received.

However, employers are not the only ones; municipal and regional elected representatives are involved as well. And why have they joined the movement? Because they understand the impact this has on the regional economy and even on the way their municipalities operate. Many employees, particularly in the smallest municipalities, work on contract or on a part-time basis, and they need to use employment insurance.

There is also a potential rural exodus when you ask someone from a more remote municipality to move to a larger centre, such as Rimouski, Rivière-du-Loup or Matane, in our region. There is a risk that these people will move away to go and work in those places. This causes our rural communities to further decline.

*Business of Supply*

•(1350)

[English]

**Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, as the NDP's deputy critic for persons with disabilities, I look at these things through the lens of a person with a disability. It has come to my attention that for persons with disabilities, it takes much longer to find jobs after being laid off from previous jobs. They have raised with me the notion that these new rules, which have a six week limit and then an eighteen week limit, will actually penalize persons with disabilities in a far greater way than any other Canadian. In other words, it will discriminate against persons with disabilities because it naturally will take them longer to find a job. Therefore, unfortunately they will be the first in line to have their wages and entitlements reduced as a result of getting past the six week and eighteen week credits quicker.

Could the member please comment on that?

[Translation]

**Mr. Guy Caron:** Mr. Speaker, what my friend just mentioned raises another major problem with the employment insurance reform.

This reform is so complex and contains so many conditions that could be considered technical that it will take a long time for us to understand all the ramifications and consequences it will have for the lives of the communities, as I mentioned in my speech, but also for the lives and situations of certain groups that were characterized, based on their status, as special groups. This is just one example of this type of discrimination, of these consequences and the impact that we see on a regular basis. The reform was implemented on January 6 and we will be seeing these kinds of consequences for a very long time.

I discussed general consequences during my speech. I avoided talking about all the technical issues. There is the obligation for claimants to accept a job as far as one hour's drive away. That means that someone in my constituency who lives in Squatec must accept a job in Rivière-du-Loup or even Rimouski, which are less than an hour's drive away. He may not decline that job or else his benefits may be reduced or cancelled. This is a reality for people in rural areas.

If we are talking about the negative consequences of these major problems for our regions, for their vitality and economies, then we need not go any further than the example I just cited and the one my colleague mentioned.

[English]

**Mr. Mark Strahl (Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Ajax—Pickering.

As several government members indicated previously, we cannot support the motion, because it simply misrepresents the facts.

The changes we have made to employment insurance are ensuring that Canadians are always better off working than not. That is why it is important to invest in connecting Canadians with available jobs in their local labour markets. The extra-five-weeks pilot project was a temporary measure brought in in 2008 and reintroduced in 2010 through Canada's economic action plan to help EI recipients during

the recession. While the opposition continues to fearmonger, the facts simply do not lie. Thanks to our efforts included in Canada's economic action plan, we have seen over 920,000 net new jobs since July 2009.

We are in a period of economic recovery, and we need to help Canadians who want to work connect with those jobs that are available in their areas. Our investments in connecting Canadians with available jobs is about making sure that Canadian workers are better aware of the opportunities available in their local areas and that Canadians always have first crack at jobs in their local communities, before temporary foreign workers do.

Our government is focused on getting Canadians working. We are focused on creating jobs. We are making progress, despite these fragile economic times.

Yet while our government makes improvement after improvement and we continue to see thousands of net new jobs created every month, what do we get from the opposition? We get fearmongering, misrepresentation of the facts and proposals to impose massive new taxes on Canadians. Our government does not accept that as a way to go about fostering continued economic recovery.

To date we have seen the NDP propose over \$3.8 billion in annual EI spending. This means that \$3.8 billion would be taken from the pockets of hard-working Canadians and small businesses, which would be forced to pay higher premiums. This does not make any sense given the economic times we live in.

Our economic prosperity depends on our ability to meet emerging and growing labour market challenges. It depends on our competitiveness. It depends on our resolve. Foremost among these challenges are skills and labour shortages. According to Statistics Canada, in the fall there were 268,000 job vacancies across the country. Our government is rising to meet this challenge. We have invested heavily in skills and training to ensure that Canadians have the skills and training they need to gain employment in the workplace.

We know that Canadians want to work, but they often face challenges finding work. What are we doing to help unemployed workers find jobs? As announced in economic action plan 2012, our government has been investing to connect unemployed Canadians with available jobs in their local areas that match their skill sets. As part of this initiative, Service Canada is sending job alerts twice a day to Canadians who are receiving employment insurance. These job alerts come from many different sources, including the job bank and private sector providers. As always, employers are required to provide evidence that they have exhausted efforts to hire Canadians before they turn to temporary foreign workers.

The improvements we have made are aimed at ensuring that Canadians receiving EI benefits will always benefit financially from accepting available work. These are common sense changes that also work toward clarifying, not changing, the responsibilities of Canadians who are collecting EI. These changes are about empowering unemployed workers, helping them get back into the workforce, and focusing resources where they are needed most.

We are helping Canadians who want to work get back to work. We are ensuring that all of these changes are grounded in common sense and fairness. It bears repeating that should Canadians who have been making legitimate efforts to find work be unsuccessful, EI will continue to be there for them, as it has always been. We fully recognize that there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work, particularly in the off-season in parts of the country where much of the economy is based on seasonal industries.

One of the myths the opposition has been spreading is the reference that our EI improvements will result in downloading of costs to the provinces. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we invest in connecting Canadians with jobs, we will actually be helping the provinces, because employed people pay taxes, which in turn helps fund provincial programs.

We will also deliver significant funding to the provinces to invest in the skills training of EI and non-EI recipients to help Canadians get into more stable, higher-paying jobs.

• (1355)

As several members have commented, the changes with respect to a reasonable job search only clarify an existing obligation under the Employment Insurance Act to be actively looking for work.

Personal circumstances will always be taken into consideration. Such circumstances include physical ability, family commitments, transportation options and whether someone would be better off working than not.

EI is an important program in Canada and will continue to be. These improvements have introduced a needed new common sense effort to help Canadians get back to work faster. That is good for Canadians, good for their communities, and most important, good for their families. For these reasons, I urge all members of the House to vote against the motion and to support our efforts to create jobs and get Canadians working.

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin):** Order, please. The time for government orders has expired, and as such, comments and questions for the hon. member for Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon will take place after question period.

The hon. member for Ahuntsic.

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## STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1400)

[Translation]

### AVEOS

**Mrs. Maria Mourani (Ahuntsic, BQ):** Mr. Speaker, today I am calling on the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities to take action on Aveos. The Quebec Superior Court ruled that Air Canada is breaking the law and must keep a maintenance centre in Montreal.

The Bloc Québécois supported the 1,800 employees in Montreal who lost their jobs. Air Canada failed to fulfill its obligations, and the federal government should have enforced the law. Instead, the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities abandoned a

### Statements by Members

leading industry in Quebec and Montreal. He chose to ignore his own law, to claim his hands were tied. The Quebec government took the case to court and won.

The Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities waited around for more than a year, wasting workers' time. Now he has to make Air Canada comply with the ruling and obey the privatization legislation.

\* \* \*

[English]

### CITY OF SASKATOON

**Mrs. Kelly Block (Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to start by wishing all of my colleagues a prosperous New Year.

Last month, our government announced an investment in a public-private partnership with the City of Saskatoon to support the construction of both a transit facility and a permanent snow storage decontamination facility in my riding of Saskatoon—Rosetown—Biggar. This investment will help the City of Saskatoon realize a long-term goal by replacing an aging facility with a state-of-the-art one located outside the downtown core and close to the new Circle Drive bridge.

I want to congratulate the City of Saskatoon on this initiative, as it will improve the quality of life for residents who live in or near the downtown core as well as improve the city's ability to deploy its vehicles across the city. I am proud to be a member of a Conservative government that is building the infrastructure necessary for a stronger, more prosperous Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and Canada.

\* \* \*

[Translation]

### INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT WEEK

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I am extremely honoured to rise today to acknowledge International Development Week. Just a few years ago, Canada still enjoyed an excellent reputation as a generous country that knew how to be very effective in the field.

But that is no longer the case. Since this government came to power, we have seen the results of the ideological cuts made to effective NGOs like KAIROS. We have seen a shift, one that favours partnerships with mining companies over helping the poorest of the poor. Last year we saw the antics of a minister who was misusing public funds. This year we are seeing the antics of a minister whose partisan opinions are expressed on the department's website and who admits that he does not understand the basic principles of effective co-operation.

This week is a time to celebrate civil society organizations in Canada. We promise them—and all Canadians—that in 2015, an NDP government will do a much better job.

*Statements by Members**[English]***INTERNATIONAL TRADE**

**Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I am proud that York Centre is the home to Bombardier Aerospace, a company that has helped put Canada on the world stage and has created jobs and economic growth in our great country.

*[Translation]*

Last week, the Canada-Spain Chamber of Commerce named Bombardier the Canadian company of the year in Spain. With a presence in more than 60 countries, Bombardier is the only corporation in the world that specializes in both the aircraft and railway sectors.

*[English]*

International trade is integral to our economy. One in five Canadian jobs is linked to exports, and trade accounts for over 35% of Canada's GDP. Since 2006, our government has concluded negotiations on more free trade agreements than any government in Canadian history. It is shameful that the NDP have opposed every single trade agreement brought before the House.

I am proud that our government is continuing to work hard to promote trade, because trade means jobs, growth and long-term prosperity for our great country, Canada.

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**SCOTT MACARTHUR**

**Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House to recognize Scott MacArthur, who recently passed away. Scott served his community and Canada in many capacities.

Scott and his wife Kay were founding members of NFU Local 104, and he served district 1, region 1 as treasurer for over 40 years. As a dairy farmer, he was a valued member of the Holstein club and served as treasurer of the P.E.I. Holsteins association for decades. Being treasurer of two farm groups obviously was not enough. Mr. MacArthur served as treasurer of the St. Columba Presbyterian Church for 50 years, was a member of session for 20, was a member of the church choir and was a member of the board of trustees.

Although quiet-spoken, he showed unwavering dedication to the farm movement, attending many national and regional conventions and also enjoying the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto.

Scott MacArthur was a trusted, faithful and hard-working individual who served his community and church with dedication. On behalf of the House, I thank Scott for his life's work and offer condolences to his wife Kay.

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● (1405)

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**Mr. Dan Albas (Okanagan—Coquihalla, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, Logan Lake is a wonderful rural resource-based community located in my riding of Okanagan—Coquihalla. Folks there are incredibly friendly, hard-working and have a great love of the outdoors.

Each year, Logan Lake puts on an incredible outdoor hockey tournament. When not outdoors, they have a very innovative and unique cable service to watch, run completely by volunteers. Make no mistake, the economic engine of this community is the Highland Valley copper mine. This is one of the largest open-pit copper mines in Canada and puts food on the table for over 900 families.

Recently, Teck Resources, the operator of the mine, was named Canada's most sustainable company. I think this is pretty exciting news for the good people of Logan Lake, for Teck Resources and for other responsible resource development. Please join me in recognizing Teck Resources and the contribution of mining in creating well-paying jobs in rural resource communities such as Logan Lake, British Columbia.

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*[Translation]***RAIL TRANSPORTATION**

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, my constituents want this government to know that they expect appropriate oversight of our railways. Some of my constituents live near railways that are not only noisy but are also an accident waiting to happen.

In fact, on September 24, 2011, a freight train derailed at Pointe Saint-Charles, a densely populated area in my riding. Luckily, no one was injured and no hazardous materials spilled.

The Transportation Safety Board report concluded that the accident was the result of excessive speed and the ambiguity of the signal indications with regard to speed in this residential sector.

On behalf of my constituents, I urge the government to consider stricter regulations for railways in residential sectors.

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*[English]***SKIN CANCER**

**Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, yesterday was World Cancer Day. It was a day to raise our voices and improve our knowledge about cancer.

One cancer that has affected my family is melanoma. This disease is preventable, yet 5,500 Canadians are diagnosed with melanoma annually, and over 950 will die from it. Thousands of Canadians head to sun destinations over the winter. I urge them to take preventative measures to protect their skin. When outdoors, stay in the shade, cover up and use sunscreen. A person's chance of developing melanoma doubles if they have had five or more sunburns before the age of 30.

*Statements by Members*

Many Canadians also use tanning beds. The World Health Organization has rated tanning beds in the highest cancer risk category, stating that tanning equipment is carcinogenic to humans. Studies have shown that using tanning beds at a young age increases the risk of skin cancer by 75%.

I urge everyone to take preventative measures and support the Indoor Tanning is Out coalition and the Tan Free Grad campaign. By increasing public awareness, we can protect our biggest organ from melanoma's reach.

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**BARRIE CHILIFEST**

**Mr. Patrick Brown (Barrie, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, this past weekend, I hosted my seventh annual Chilifest in Barrie, with the help of many generous volunteers. Each year, residents join me at the Royal Canadian Legion hall for warm bowls of homemade chili in support of two local charities, thanks to Lawrence Vindum and The Butcher Shop and their culinary talents.

This year's Chilifest supported the CNIB and the Bill Wilkins scholarship fund. CNIB helps thousands of Canadians who are blind or partially sighted. The Bill Wilkins scholarship was established in 2003, in memory of Bill Wilkins, who lost his life in the line of duty with Barrie Fire. Each year, it enables two exceptional students to enrol at the pre-service firefighter program at Georgian College.

I would like to give special thanks to Leila Verheyen from the CNIB, Kirk Mason for preparing the chili and the students enrolled in the pre-service firefighter program at Georgian College, in Barrie, for all their hard work in making this event another success.

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● (1410)

*[Translation]***WHITE CANE WEEK**

**Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, this is White Cane Week. It is an opportunity to raise awareness about the reality of people living with a visual impairment and their contribution to society.

Vision loss carries a huge financial burden and costs our society billions of dollars a year. If nothing is done, these costs will rise substantially over the coming years, given our aging population.

Unfortunately, access to specialized documents and products for the visually impaired is still lacking in Canada. I would like to remind hon. members that Canada still does not have a national network of public libraries with accessible formats for the visually impaired.

It is unacceptable that people with a visual impairment are required to pay federal and provincial tax on the already very expensive assistive technologies they need, when many of them are living below the poverty line.

I urge the government to take the meaningful action needed to meet its international commitments in this regard.

*[English]***FORESTRY INDUSTRY**

**Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, our Conservative government has taken unprecedented steps to help renew our forestry sector in rural Canada after a damaging recession. We have invested in everything from making mills more energy efficient to new renovation technologies and market diversification.

Budget 2012 grants an additional \$105 million to transform the forestry sector, and we are getting results. The Forest Products Association of Canada has created a new website looking for job applicants. Why? It estimates 60,000 new jobs in the next seven years. This is great news for rural communities across Canada that were hit hard during the recession.

While the recovery remains fragile, there are signs of hope in the forestry sector. Through our government's strong support for market diversification, exports to China have increased by 1,000%. While focusing on diversification we are also seeing our traditional market in the United States rebounding. This is good news for rural Canadians and we are proud of our work to support Canadian jobs.

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*[Translation]***RIVIÈRE-DU-NORD**

**Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to share two stories that show how generous and compassionate my constituents are. Two separate benefits have been organized to support two children whose lives have been turned completely upside down by illness.

William Boucher, a three-year-old boy from Saint-Jérôme, has a serious form of leukemia for which he has to receive daily injections and weekly chemotherapy treatment. The École de danse orientale Samaya has organized a fundraiser with a show and a spaghetti supper for February 10.

Julymaude Boulet is a five-year-old girl from Saint-Colomban who had emergency surgery on a malignant tumour that was eating away at a vertebra and for which she has to undergo regular treatments. The community has organized a donation drive and a benefit show that will be held on February 16.

On behalf of all my colleagues in the New Democratic Party, I congratulate the community for its solidarity and offer our support to William and Julymaude, as well as their parents, as they fight these illnesses. Do not lose hope.

*Statements by Members*

[English]

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH**

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Ajax—Pickering, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand in the House today to celebrate Black History Month. This occasion allows all Canadians from coast to coast to learn about the many contributions black Canadians have made to the building of our great country. They were a part of our story from Canada's earliest days. In the War of 1812, they helped win the fight for Canada.

This year, our government is recognizing the contributions of black Canadians in law enforcement, both past and present. They are Canadians such as Devon Clunis, Canada's first black police chief, recently appointed in Winnipeg; Staff Sergeant Jeff Haskins, deputy chief of the Durham Regional Police Service detachment in my home community of Ajax—Pickering; and Mohamed Dualeh, a parking enforcement officer right here in Ottawa who helped save the lives of three people last year. Tonight he will receive a diamond jubilee medal in honour of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, during the Black History Month event at the Canadian War Museum.

I encourage all Canadians to visit [cic.gc.ca/multiculturalism](http://cic.gc.ca/multiculturalism), or to join us at J. Clarke Richardson high school in Ajax next Saturday to celebrate the tremendous contributions Canadians of black, African and Caribbean heritage have made to our country.

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**CAIRINE WILSON**

**Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, 83 years ago today, Liberal Prime Minister Sir William Lyon Mackenzie King threw open Parliament's doors to gender equality by appointing Cairine Wilson as the first female Canadian senator.

Wilson was a true pioneer for women and in this role she worked to make both Canada and the world a better place for all people. Domestically, she was the chairman of the Canadian National Committee on Refugees, a role she fulfilled with such distinction that she received the Legion of Honour from France. She was the first woman to chair a senate standing committee. In 1955, she again crashed through the glass ceiling by becoming the first female deputy speaker of the Senate. Internationally, Cairine Wilson became our first female delegate to the U.N., where she worked to advance a strong notion of social justice and respect for all.

Indeed, we owe a tremendous debt to this pioneer of equality, a woman who did not just knock down barriers, she jumped over them as she reached for the stars.

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● (1415)

**NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA**

**Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, page 4 of the NDP platform costing document is very clear. The NDP leader's leadership campaign was very clear. The countless NDP MPs across the country are very clear. What are they clear about? The NDP is planning to raise over \$20 billion in a job-killing carbon tax that would increase the cost of gas, groceries and electricity. I know that my constituents in Etobicoke Centre would not welcome that at all.

The NDP members can run but they cannot hide. At every turn our Conservative government will warn Canadians about the NDP's job-killing \$20 billion carbon tax. Canadians already know that it is our Conservative government that is on their side.

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**EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**

**Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, when Canadians lose their jobs, they trust that their government will help them, their industries and their communities. Instead what they get is a government that sends dispatches from wood-panelled offices in Ottawa telling Service Canada employees to meet EI denial quotas and to treat EI applicants as criminals.

When we asked the minister why Conservatives were reducing EI, the minister responded, "Once again, the NDP is protecting the bad guys".

The NDP is proud to protect the unemployed. While Conservatives see EI as wasteful spending, they are happy to defend their alleged senator over how many houses he has and how much he is ripping off Canadian taxpayers. They call the EI system lucrative while defending, tooth and nail, the entitlements of Conservative senators.

Here is a common sense message to help the Prime Minister recalibrate. He should stop defending his unaccountable buddies in the Senate and start helping Canadians who cannot find work.

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**THE ECONOMY**

**Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, our government knows what matters to Canadians: jobs and economic growth. We were pleased to learn that Canada's economy grew by 0.3% in November, better than what economists were projecting.

Since the Christmas break, Conservative MPs and ministers have sat down with hard-working Canadians in over 200 meetings to make sure the Canadian economy is creating jobs and long-term prosperity. No wonder Canada has the lowest debt burden by far and the strongest job creation record in the G7 with over 900,000 net new jobs since July 2009.

While we are focused on what matters to Canadians, the NDP, of course, is scheming to implement a \$21 billion job-killing carbon tax on Canadians. Such a tax would ruin our economy and hit low-income Canadians the hardest. Our government will continue to fight the NDP's reckless economic policies and we will remain focused on what matters to Canadians: jobs, prosperity and economic growth.



## ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

### AIR CANADA

**Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, last year when Air Canada put an end to its maintenance operations in Winnipeg, Mississauga and Montreal, the Conservatives refused to enforce the Air Canada Public Participation Act.

The Conservatives' negligence cost our country 2,600 good jobs. The court ruling was clear: Air Canada does not have the right to award its maintenance contracts to Singapore and Brazil.

Will our so-called law and order government finally enforce the law in order to keep these jobs in Canada?

**Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, obviously, the government expects Air Canada to respect its clear legal obligations.

As the Leader of the NDP is aware, the reality is that this case is still before the courts and we are awaiting a ruling.

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• (1420)

[English]

### THE ENVIRONMENT

**Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the government needs to enforce the law and keep these jobs in Canada.

After years of being ignored and dismissed by the Conservative government, today Canada's environment commissioner delivered his final report to Parliament. New Democrats would like to thank the environment commissioner for his service.

The commissioner's final report is stark. Under Conservatives, environmental protection is not keeping pace with resource development. In Canada polluters are no longer required to pay for the pollution they create.

Why are the Conservatives letting big polluters off the hook and sticking taxpayers with the bill to clean up the environment?

**Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the polluter pay principle is at the heart of this government's environmental philosophy. We favour a policy of responsible resource development. As we have said before, responsible means enhanced environmental protection. The government has already announced particular measures in this regard.

In terms of the environment commissioner's report, it contains a number of useful suggestions in terms of the next steps we will be announcing.

**Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, let us talk, then, about responsible resource development.

According to the environment commissioner, the number of fracking wells across Canada is expected to double over the next 20 years to 400,000. The chemicals used in fracking are known to contain dangerous carcinogens, yet companies are not required to divulge their full contents. The Canadian Association of Petroleum

### Oral Questions

Producers has a policy of disclosure by its members, but of course is powerless to enforce it.

Will the government make it mandatory for companies to disclose the dangerous chemicals used in fracking, yes or no?

**Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition should know this area is under provincial regulation. A number of provinces have taken different approaches toward regulation of the sector.

At the same time, in terms of the particular substances used, this government does have a world-leading chemicals management plan and will evaluate the substances used in that regard.

**Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, federal waters and fisheries are the federal government's responsibility.

[Translation]

Environmental protection is not keeping pace with development, and Canadians are paying the price.

That is exactly what is happening with the marine protected areas. Twenty years after the Convention on Biological Diversity was signed, only 1% of Canada's marine environment is being protected.

While pollution and overfishing threaten our oceans, why is the minister rushing into offshore development without proper protection?

[English]

**Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, when it comes to marine protected areas, it should be noted that it was under this government that Canada's protected parklands increased by over 50%.

We have established 12 marine protected areas. We know more work needs to be done. That is why we are having robust consultations with a variety of stakeholders to ensure we get things right.

When it comes to protecting parklands and our water, Canada has a good track record under this Conservative government.

**Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, unlike the Conservatives, the New Democrats thank the environment commissioner for his work.

In today's report the commissioner warned us that despite repeated Conservative assurances, Atlantic offshore petroleum boards were not adequately prepared to respond to an oil spill.

Is the minister doing anything to ensure that the response plans are effective and that government action will be coordinated in the event of a major oil spill off the Atlantic coast, or does the minister agree with the hon. member for Calgary Centre, who claims that oil spills will simply biodegrade in three years?

**Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, as I am pleased to reiterate from yesterday, from the Minister of Transport, that we have commissioned a risk assessment study on readiness to respond to spills in Canadian waters.

*Oral Questions*

I would like to remind my colleague opposite of the many environmental protections that came into force under CEAA, 2012 and recently implemented, including new regulations to enhance tanker inspection regimes by strengthening inspection requirements and improved navigational products such as updated charts for shipping routes.

**Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I have a question for the Prime Minister.

The environmental commissioner's report shows that there is a significant gap between the pace of natural resource development and the capacity of the government to review that development and ensure environmental protection. That is a clear conclusion of the report of the environmental commissioner.

Does the Prime Minister agree with that central conclusion?

• (1425)

**Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the government has already been clear that responsible resource development means that as we see the growth in resource development over the decades to come, there will have to be enhanced measures of environmental protection.

The government took some measures over the course of the past year and has indicated in a number of areas it intends to take additional measures. We thank the environment commissioner for his report. It will be a useful piece of advice as we move forward with these additional measures.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, contrary to what the Prime Minister just said, the Conservatives have reduced the federal government's ability to assure the public that people will really be protected in the case of accidents, whether they be nuclear accidents, accidents related to marine development or accidents that occur in the North.

The commissioner's report's findings are very clear: there is a difference between the problem and the government's ability to resolve it and to protect Canadians.

**Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, it is quite the opposite. When the government says that it supports responsible resource development, it is saying that it must increase its support for environmental protection.

We announced some measures last year and we have already indicated our intention to continue working on certain files. The commissioner gave us very useful ideas in this regard and we thank him for his contribution.

\* \* \*

[*English*]

**THE ECONOMY**

**Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, we continue to receive reports with respect to the problem of consumer and household debt across the country.

What this debt really masks is the fact that in hard times Canadians are forced to borrow at the 20th of the month because they have to make ends meet by the end of the month. We are seeing

this pattern across the board. Whether it is increasing lines of credit, or credit cards or even if it is going to loan sharks or loan companies, this is a problem facing ordinary Canadians.

Would the Prime Minister not agree that this is not simply a problem of people perhaps spending too much on a big screen television, as was suggested, but is a reality for Canadians who are facing hard times?

**Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, on the contrary, the growth in Canadian household debt over the past few years has been primarily in the areas of mortgages. Because Canadians have been feeling confident about the state of their own household and about their ability to handle additional mortgage debt, they have been able to purchase new homes or larger homes.

At the same time, along with the Governor of the Bank of Canada and others, we have expressed our concern about the growth of this debt, as interest rates will eventually go up, and have urged moderation. I am glad to see that some of the recent steps the government has taken have encouraged households to moderate their accumulation of debt.

\* \* \*

[*Translation*]

**THE ENVIRONMENT**

**Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are putting Canadians at risk. The absolute liability limit of nuclear facility operators has not been updated for 35 years. In other words, if an accident happens, Canadian taxpayers are on their own. The Fukushima catastrophe cost close to \$200 billion.

Why are the Conservatives passing the buck to Canadians when it comes to paying for the damage from a nuclear disaster? Why are they being so irresponsible?

[*English*]

**Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the irony is inescapable because the legislation would have been passed if the NDP had not opposed it the last time. The NDP members filibustered at every point.

We intend to raise the limit by 10 times. The House leader was the critic at the time and he did everything he could to stall the legislation.

**Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, that was a nice try. Canadians would trust the environment commissioner over the PMO talking points any time.

*Oral Questions*

The commissioner was clear. Conservatives are playing Russian roulette on oil spill clean-ups. There is a \$30 million liability limit. However, supertanker spills cost billions of dollars. This negligence means that our tourism, fishery and economies of our coastal communities are all being put at risk. Even one tanker could leave Canadian families on the hook for billions of dollars in clean-up costs.

Why have the Conservatives left Canadians standing on the edge of a liability cliff? Why are they so irresponsible?

• (1430)

**Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, as I have said earlier, our government is committed to periodically assessing the financial liability assessment to ensure that Canada's polluter pay system remains the strongest in the world.

With regard to our responsible resource development plan, we have undertaken many actions to ensure that there is increased pipeline safety inspections and increased safety with regard to tanker transport. All of these things were included in our responsible resource development plan, which the NDP voted against.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP):** Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, the commissioner does not mince words criticizing Conservative inaction on the risks of hydrofracking despite steadily accelerating development.

The commissioner is clear: Canadians do not have the information they need to judge the consequences of this industry's actions on their living environment, their health and drinking water reserves.

Why are the Conservatives letting development go ahead at the expense of protection? Why do they refuse to legislate the toxic substances used in fracking?

[*English*]

**Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, as the Prime Minister already noted today, hydraulic fracturing in Canada is strictly regulated by the provinces and must be done using approved equipment and specific procedures. However, this gives me the opportunity to reiterate our world-renowned chemical management plan under which we have invested more than \$500 million to assess toxic substances across the country.

**Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the Fisheries Act used to protect fish and fish habitat until the Conservatives gutted the act and rammed through changes without proper consultation. Even the department could not explain what those changes would mean. Now, according to the environment commissioner, it does not know if its own no net loss policy remains in effect. Nor does it know if it can cover the cost of fish habitat compensation plans.

How can the minister allow this kind of mismanagement with our fisheries?

**Hon. Keith Ashfield (Minister of Fisheries and Oceans and Minister for the Atlantic Gateway, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the Fisheries Act has and will continue to have strong protection against

pollution to ensure that Canadian waters are clean. There are zero changes to the federal protections against pollution.

\* \* \*

[*Translation*]

**EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, today we learned that the Conservatives are asking job-seeking Canadians to tell them how many resumés they send out each week. Those whom the minister calls bad job seekers are finding out a little more each day in the newspapers about the restrictive measures related to the so-called “reasonable search” that is now being added to the minister's quotas.

Why do the Conservatives not reveal the entire list of criteria they are going to use to cut the employment insurance benefits of those they call the bad guys?

**Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, she is wrong. We want the unemployed to find new jobs because they are better off when they are working than when they are not. We are providing them with assistance and information about jobs available in their regions that match their qualifications. We want to help them find work.

[*English*]

**Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the secrets keep leaking out. First we learn that Service Canada staff have to make quota for cutting job seekers off EI each month. Now we hear that the Conservatives are trying to quietly change what constitutes a job search.

The minister keeps demonizing hard-working Canadians and changing the rules without even telling them. When will the minister admit that all of these changes are not about fraud at all, but that she is quite simply hell-bent on cutting EI just when families need it the most?

**Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, in fact, it is just the opposite of what we are trying to do, which is help Canadians who have lost their job through no fault of their own get back to work so they and their families are better off. That is why we have expanded the job bank and the job postings that are on it. That is why we are letting people who are on EI know what jobs are available in their area within their skill range so they can apply for those jobs so they and their families are better off.

I wish the NDP would help us help Canadians be better off.

*Oral Questions*

[Translation]

**Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the problem comes down to the fact that the minister did not consult people in resource regions where the economy depends on seasonal employment. Nor did she consult with people in cities. A reform, she calls it! No, it is a direct attack on workers everywhere.

Another example is that a large majority of workers in the cultural industries such as television, film and music are freelancers who have to turn to employment insurance from time to time. They are what she calls frequent claimants, or, as she actually likes to say, “bad guys”.

Why has the minister chosen to ignore the reality of workers in cultural industries?

• (1435)

**Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, our government made it possible for self-employed workers to have access to special employment insurance benefits.

Our government, for the first time in our country's history, has voluntarily provided self-employed workers with access to parental and sickness benefits. But the opposition voted against helping those people.

\* \* \*

**GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS**

**Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have no money for the unemployed, but they have plenty for their propaganda. Conservative advertising expenses have mushroomed, increasing by 72% since the recession.

Instead of spending millions of taxpayer dollars to sell oil pipelines, they could have used that money for infrastructure, training for unemployed workers or programs for unemployed youth. Lots of talk, but no walk.

Instead of leading people to believe that they are taking action, why do the Conservatives not put money into programs?

**Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the government is responsible for informing Canadians about the important programs and services offered to them.

The government has this responsibility, and advertising is an essential means for informing Canadians about important issues, such as temporary stimulus measures, tax credits and public health issues.

[English]

**Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP):** The problem, Mr. Speaker, is that the government is showing all the discipline of a teenager with their parents' credit card with regard to propaganda.

This shameful spending spree reached its peak last Sunday when government ads were blanketed over the Canadian coverage of the Super Bowl. Tax dollars are being diverted from creating jobs to spend on Conservative government “feel goodery”.

Can the minister tell Canadians how many tax dollars were actually spent on government advertising during the Super Bowl, or have the lights gone out on accountability?

**Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, what I can say from the last reported amount presented to Parliament is that we spent \$83.3 million on essential advertising, which is a lot less than the \$111 million spent by the previous Liberal government in its last year of power.

When it comes to credit cards and lights out, I can tell the hon. member that his party's plan for a \$21 billion carbon tax means that nobody will have any lights on.

\* \* \*

**THE ECONOMY**

**Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, in budget 2006 the Minister of Finance cited the U.S. housing bubble as a positive example for Canada:

Households' willingness and ability to spend accumulated housing wealth—through equity withdrawals and mortgage refinancing—have been a major contributor to the growth....

On page 88 of that budget, the minister brought in changes that led to the introduction of U.S. style 40-year mortgages with no down payment here in Canada.

Does the minister not understand that it was the loose credit policy he introduced in Canada, the U.S. style mortgage policy, that helped create the housing and personal debt bubble we have today in Canada?

**Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, as I am sure the member opposite has observed, our housing market has been faring much better than the U.S. residential mortgage market over the past few years, and that is in part because it has been well managed.

We have restricted the availability of insured mortgages four times over the course of the past several years, which has encouraged some moderation in the market. The Superintendent of Financial Institutions has also encouraged some moderation in the market and Canadians themselves have shown some moderation, particularly in the past year.

**Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, before the minister tightened mortgage rules, he loosened them, and the minister's easy credit helped drive consumer debt and housing prices to record highs.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

• (1440)

**The Speaker:** Order. The hon. member for Kings—Hants has the floor.

**Hon. Scott Brison:** Mr. Speaker, *The Economist* magazine calls Canada's housing market whoppingly over-valued.

Today we learned that the average Canadian owes a record \$27,000 in consumer debt on top of mortgages, yet in Davos the minister denied that rising mortgage levels and personal debt are a real problem in Canada.

*Oral Questions*

When will the minister admit there is a real problem here? When will he admit that he created—

**The Speaker:** The hon. Minister of Finance.

**Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, we watch and we monitor the residential housing market carefully, which is why we have intervened four times during the course of the last four years.

Canadians have shown some moderation, in particular in some of the more volatile markets in Vancouver and in Toronto in the condo markets. We have seen some welcome moderation. This is good. This is the kind of thing that we were hoping would result from that actions taken not only by the Government of Canada but also by the Superintendent of Financial Institutions.

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**PENSIONS**

**Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, the average Canadian's debt hit \$27,485 in 2012, a 6% increase. In response, the minister began wagging his finger and lecturing Canadians on the merits of slashing debt and investing wisely. But while investing for one's retirement is wise, the minister forgets that many struggle to raise their family and to put food on the table today. PRPPs and TFSAs are useless for many Canadian families.

When will the minister stop his finger wagging and work to improve pension security for working class families struggling to make ends meet today?

**Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC):** Mr. Speaker, this is a great opportunity to talk about the benefits of pooled registered pension plans.

We are working with the provinces who are our partners in this. We have worked well with them. They are planning on bringing forward their legislation to match ours. This will provide an opportunity for over nine million Canadians who do not now have a workplace pension plan to be able to save for their future, and that is very important.

\* \* \*

[*Translation*]

**PUBLIC SAFETY**

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, when I talked about the Conservatives' friend Arthur Porter on December 5, 2012, they dodged the question to avoid accountability.

But the scandal regarding the management of public funds in the construction of the MUHC continues to grow, and the public wants answers.

Millions of dollars vanished into thin air, millions that should have been used to care for patients. Strangely, this is the same Mr. Porter the Conservatives had appointed to head the Security Intelligence Review Committee.

What unique qualities does this individual possess that allowed him to be entrusted with such a crucial position by the Conservatives?

[*English*]

**Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, Arthur Porter submitted his resignation from his position as chair of the Security Intelligence Review Committee. We accepted his resignation. The allegations that Mr. Porter is facing do not have anything to do with his former responsibilities.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, accepting his resignation is all well and good, but he should never have been appointed.

Either the Conservatives were negligent in the screening process or they deliberately ignored his dubious past. They can try to wash their hands of the matter today, but for years Mr. Porter was their friend and contributed to their election coffers.

The Prime Minister and the President of the Treasury Board were quite happy to parade around with Mr. Porter for years. In short, the Conservatives rewarded him at every opportunity.

So, either they made a mistake or they were rewarding him for services rendered. Which is it?

[*English*]

**Ms. Candice Bergen (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Public Safety, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, Mr. Porter resigned. We accepted his resignation. The allegations that he is facing have nothing to do with his former responsibilities.

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**ETHICS**

**Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, if someone attempted to receive EI they were not eligible for, the government would come down on them like a tonne of bricks. But when Conservative Senator Mike Duffy attempted to procure a health card in a province he does not live in, so that he could hit up the taxpayer for a \$30,000 housing allowance he is not entitled to, the government calls him a loyal Conservative. Ordinary Canadians might consider this fraud, but the Conservative government is a government where cronies can do no wrong.

Why the double standard? Why will the Conservatives not hold their cronies in the Senate to account for ripping off the taxpayer?

**Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, for a number of weeks we have heard the hon. member advocating in the House a double standard for himself compared with other people. We certainly do not hold by that. In fact, we do have a clear standard on this. All people on both sides of the House recognize that all parliamentarians are expected to maintain residences in their home region and the national capital region. We know that the Senate is reviewing those rules and making sure that they are applied properly and are appropriate.

*Oral Questions*

•(1445)

**Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, what happened to those Reform Party zealots who promised that they would clean up Ottawa? They sit obediently behind the Conservative House leader who has been doing back-flips trying to cover up the fact that the Minister of Finance broke the law and is trying to pass off Mike Duffy as a constituency rep. This is absurd. This is a guy who was caught falsifying facts and sticking his hand in the taxpayer's pocket.

Do we really believe that the Conservative cronies in the Senate are going to make him pay the money back? No one believes that. The question is whether they are going to show some sense of accountability and make this guy pay back the \$30,000-plus. Yes or no?

**Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, as I said, the Senate is responsible for those rules. It has its own committee that is reviewing them and all the senators subject to them, to ensure that the rules are indeed applied properly, as we all expect they will be.

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**THE ECONOMY**

**Mr. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, while the NDP calls for job-killing taxes on business, our government is getting results for the economy, creating over 900,000 net new jobs created since the worst of the recession, with 90% of them full-time. Our economic action plan leaves more money in the hands of entrepreneurs to hire more Canadians and grow their businesses, not tax them out of business like the NDP.

In recent weeks, many Canadian retailers have announced their intentions to expand, something that the NDP has not bothered to mention. Can the world's best finance minister update the House on these good news announcements?

**Hon. Jim Flaherty (Minister of Finance, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his question and his assessment.

In the past few weeks alone, the home improvement retailer Lowe's said it would create 1,000 jobs. The Source electronic store plans 20 new stores across Canada. Walmart announced the opening of 37 new retail centres, expected to generate more than 7,000 store, trade and construction jobs across the country.

While the NDP talks down our economy, companies in Canada are employing more and more Canadians.

\* \* \*

**AIR CANADA**

**Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, speaking about jobs, when Air Canada forced Aveos to shut down, we asked the minister repeatedly to uphold the law and to order Air Canada to keep high-quality maintenance jobs here in Canada. Taking action could have saved over 2,000 jobs, but the Conservatives did nothing.

Now that the judge has spoken, when will the Conservatives enforce the law, stop Air Canada from violating the law and bring thousands of good jobs back to Canada?

**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, we understand that the loss of these jobs was devastating for the workers and their communities. The matter is undergoing legal proceedings. We will follow that.

[Translation]

**Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, here is the Conservatives' strategy in all its splendour. When an issue arises, no one rises on that side to speak up for workers. During the proceedings, they remain silent and I bet they will remain silent afterwards, because it will be too late yet again.

If the minister had followed his own policies, he would have ordered Air Canada to comply with the Air Canada Public Participation Act. The company would have been forced to keep the maintenance centre for its aircraft here in Canada.

Does the minister realize that his inaction over the past year has resulted in the export of many quality jobs?

**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, if we were to rely on the NDP, we would have a new \$21 billion carbon tax, taxes would go up by \$56 billion, more jobs would be killed—

**The Speaker:** Order. The hon. Minister of Transport has the floor.

**Hon. Denis Lebel:** Mr. Speaker, we respect decisions made by businesses. In this case, the legal process is under way.

**Ms. Isabelle Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, NDP):** Precisely, Mr. Speaker. When something must be done to enforce the law, the Conservatives do nothing. However, when people exercise their labour rights, they get involved. Is there not a contradiction here? Yet, there is a similarity between the two situations in that the Conservatives do not care about workers.

The federal government had a responsibility to step in and force Air Canada to comply with the law. Instead, Montreal has lost 1,800 good jobs.

Is it the minister who is going to pay for these salaries? Will he at least have the decency to rise and apologize?

•(1450)

**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, in our country we must respect the legal process, but the NDP does not seem to understand that. There is a legal process under way, and of course we are going to respect the processes that are in place in our country.

*Oral Questions**[English]*

**Mr. Pat Martin (Winnipeg Centre, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, Air Canada's CEO seems to view Canadians the way P.T. Barnum used to view circus-goers. He is thumbing his nose at the legislation that governs his airline. He treats our Minister of Transport like a doormat.

If government wants to stand up for law enforcement and victims, why does it not stand up for the 400 victims of Calin Rovinescu in my riding of Winnipeg Centre, in Montreal, in Mississauga and around the country? It could stand up and make Air Canada live by the law of the land.

**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, we stand up for all of Canada and the Canadian economy. There have been more than 900,000 jobs created since July 2009. We worked very hard on that.

However, on this issue, the matter is undergoing a legal proceeding and we will follow that.

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*[Translation]***EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE**

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' unjust changes to employment insurance do not just penalize workers, they penalize employers too.

Whether for agriculture on the Prairies, for tourism in the Niagara region, for the education system in Quebec or for the Atlantic oil industry, employers need a trained, local workforce at times of the year when they do not offer regular work. If they do not have access to those workers, they will be forced to close their doors.

Why do the Conservatives insist on making changes to employment insurance that will eliminate jobs and penalize employers all across Canada?

**Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, it is true that there is a shortage of workers everywhere in the country. But we want to help all Canadians to find a job. With a job, they will be better off than without one. If a seasonal worker can have a full-time, better paying job, then he should take it. It will be better for him, his family and his community.

That is why we are helping people to get skills training. We want to help Canadians get to work.

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*[English]***GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES**

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, what really rubs Canadians the wrong way, what really grinds their gears, is that the Conservative government continues to rack up record deficits while it continues to cut programs and make changes that hurt the most vulnerable Canadians. It went ahead and increased its advertising budget by 72% just to pat itself on the back. That would be like the fire department arriving at a house ablaze and

running around screaming, "Fire, fire", rather than picking up the hose and putting the fire out.

The Conservatives have cut programs. They have gutted services. Have they no shame and no conscience whatsoever?

**Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, on the subject of advertising, first of all, advertising this year is 46% below 2009-2010. As I mentioned earlier, in comparison with the last full year of the last Liberal government, way back in 2005, which spent \$111 million, we are well below that.

I would just say to the hon. member that we are here to communicate with Canadians on issues that are important to them, like public health issues, economic issues and tax issues, and we will continue to do so.

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**HEALTH**

**Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, over the last month Health Canada has licensed more than a dozen high-caffeine energy shots for sale in Canada. These drinks are linked to stomach pain, tremors, insomnia, abnormal heart rates and in some cases death.

In the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration is investigating side effects and deaths linked to energy shots. Is it not time that the Conservative government did the same and stopped its caffeine-fuelled fast-tracking of energy shots?

● (1455)

**Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, Health Canada has been very clear that caffeinated energy drinks are not recommended for children.

Last year our government announced a new approach to regulating energy drinks that would include limits on the level of caffeine in these products. It also includes improved labelling in order to support consumers and parents in making informed choices. The new measures will also help Canadians make informed decisions about the amount of caffeine they consume.

*[Translation]*

**Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the minister seems to be taking the matter of energy drinks lightly. But the dangers are very real.

Investigations are currently taking place in the United States following deaths that are possibly linked to these concentrates. Rather than granting temporary approval to such products while awaiting the results of the tests, Health Canada should make sure that the drinks meet public health criteria before allowing them onto the market.

Will the minister commit to providing Canadians with correct information about the dangers associated with consuming energy drinks?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

**Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, as I stated earlier, last year our government announced new approaches to regulating energy drinks that will include the limits on the level of caffeine in these products. It also includes improved labelling so that Canadians and consumers make informed choices about the level of caffeine. We have acted on this issue.

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**INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION**

**Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, this week is International Development Week.

Canada's international assistance focuses on getting tangible results for the taxpayers' investments, results like assisting those affected by the typhoon in the Philippines and delivering food and nutritional services to 1.3 million people in Mali.

Would the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation please update this House on Canada's commitment to food security?

**Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, Canada is a global leader in providing food to those people in developing countries who need it most. We are committed to achieving long-term results that improve the lives of women, men and children living in poverty. That is why the Minister of International Cooperation announced today more Canadian support for the world's hungry under the new food assistance convention.

From untying food assistance to being the first G8 country to deliver on its L'Aquila food security commitment, our government has stood up for those most in need.

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*[Translation]***CO-OPERATIVES**

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, yesterday, I asked the government if we could expect that some of the \$400 million in new funding for venture capital would be earmarked for co-operatives. In its response, the government basically ignored the question and made mention of a fund. But the fund in question is available only to Quebec co-operatives.

If that is the solution for funding co-operatives—an issue that the government has acknowledged—when can we expect to see a fund that is available to all co-operatives in every province and territory and not just in Quebec?

**Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC):** Mr. Speaker, we know that co-operatives are an important driver of Canada's economy. That is why we accepted the recommendations put forth by the committee that was struck, in particular the recommendation that responsibility for co-operatives be transferred back to Industry Canada.

I would remind my colleague that, as he is aware, the Business Development Bank of Canada also announced an investment fund for co-operatives.

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**TRANSPORTATION**

**Mr. Hoang Mai (Brossard—La Prairie, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, along with the NDP and the cities of the South Shore, now Montreal is also calling for public transit to be made a priority on the new Champlain Bridge. Ideally, it would involve a light rail transit system.

Given this consensus, can the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities assure us that the decision-making process will include a light rail system during negotiations with the Government of Quebec?

**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, since our very first announcement regarding a new bridge over the St. Lawrence River, we have always clearly stated that transit would be part of the new bridge. That is nothing new.

From the very beginning, we have said that it was subject to provincial jurisdictions and we would respect those jurisdictions. It is up to Quebec to decide what kind of transit system it wants to use.

Incidentally, I would like to point out that, over the past year, representatives from Transport Canada and the Government of Quebec have had 35 meetings on the subject of the new bridge over the St. Lawrence. Furthermore, in July 2012, a committee was struck at my request to oversee everything. So it is quite amusing to hear these things now.

\* \* \*

● (1500)

*[English]***FORESTRY INDUSTRY**

**Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the forestry sector is a key employer for rural communities across Canada. Our Conservative government has taken unprecedented steps to help renew our forestry sector after a damaging recession, and we continue to show that support through our economic action plan by investing an additional \$105 million to transform and put this sector on a stable footing.

Would the parliamentary secretary inform this House of more good news about the forestry sector?

**Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, once again the hon. member for Cariboo—Prince George is standing up for his constituents.

The Forest Products Association of Canada has just created a new website looking for job applicants. It estimates it will need to fill 60,000 jobs over the next seven years. This is great news for those rural communities in Canada that were hard hit during the recession.



Our government is proud of the support we have provided that has helped produce a 1,000% increase in Canadian softwood lumber exports to China. Our government will continue to work with hundreds of communities across Canada that depend upon the forestry sector.

\* \* \*

#### VETERANS AFFAIRS

**Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, after a long-fought battle with Veterans Affairs, Colonel Neil Russell, a post-Korean War vet, was granted a bed in the veterans' wing of Parkwood Hospital in London, Ontario. Granting that long-term care bed in a veterans' wing sets an important precedent.

The fact is that the government keeps modern-day vets out of long-term care, even when beds are available. That is a disgrace.

Will the Conservatives guarantee beds to all veterans, without forcing them to do battle with their own government?

**Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, actually, there are more than 9,000 veterans who are currently depending on over 1,700 provincial long-term care facilities.

We are there for veterans, especially our Second World War and Korean War veterans. When there were no health systems in this country, we were there for our veterans, and we are still there for them today, in partnership with provinces.

\* \* \*

[Translation]

#### THE ENVIRONMENT

**Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matapédia, BQ):** Mr. Speaker, today's report from the environment commissioner is scathing: Ottawa and the Canada-Newfoundland and Labrador Board are ignoring basic safety and environmental requirements and are not prepared for an oil spill.

For two years, the government has not listened to Quebecers' concerns about the Old Harry oil development project and has ignored the unanimous resolution of Quebec's National Assembly demanding that there be a moratorium on this project, which is located only 80 km from the Magdalen Islands.

Will the government continue to ignore the risks that developing the Old Harry site pose to Quebec coastal communities and suspend all other existing permits?

[English]

**Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, as is noted in the report, we have taken all of the Commissioner of the Environment's findings into consideration.

As I have mentioned several times today, we have taken several positive steps to ensure the safety in transport of oil, including those actions outlined in our responsible resource development plan, as well as the commission of a risk assessment study on readiness to respond to spills in Canadian waters, which we announced yesterday.

#### Business of Supply

#### POINTS OF ORDER

##### ORAL QUESTIONS

**Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I just had a chance to review the record of *Hansard* for last Tuesday.

In the course of an exchange between the member for Winnipeg North, my colleague, and the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, the minister referred to Barbara Jackman, who is an honoree of the Law Society of Upper Canada, a medallist at the Law Society, and has received a doctorate from the Law Society. He referred to Ms. Jackman, who has no means to defend herself in this place or anywhere else, as "a left-wing hack".

I would like to give the minister the opportunity to withdraw that statement.

**Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I would be happy to withdraw the word. I did not mean to imply any unethical conduct on Madam Jackman's part. I should have said "a left-wing activist". There is no shame in that.

\* \* \*

[Translation]

#### BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

**Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, there have been consultations among all parties, and I believe you will find the unanimous consent of the House for the following motion:

That, notwithstanding any Standing Order or usual practices of the House, during the debate today pursuant to Standing Order 53.1, no quorum calls, requests for unanimous consent or dilatory motions shall be received by the Chair, and any member rising to speak during debate may indicate to the Chair that he or she will be dividing his or her time with another member.

• (1505)

[English]

**The Speaker:** Does the hon. government House leader have the unanimous consent of the House to propose the motion?

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

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

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

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#### GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

#### BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

##### OPPOSITION MOTION—EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

**The Speaker:** Order. I will just ask everyone who needs to carry on conversations with their colleagues to do so outside of the chamber.

*Business of Supply*

Before question period, the hon. member for Chilliwack—Fraser Canyon had just finished his speech and was looking forward to questions and comments. We will take questions and comments now.

Resuming debate, the parliamentary secretary.

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to rise in this House to respond to the motion from the member for Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles and to emphasize at the beginning of this speech, as my colleagues will be emphasizing, that we will not be supporting this motion.

It is unfortunate that, once again, the opposition is attempting not to debate an important government program, a vital government program in need of updating, in need of change, but rather to mislead Canadians.

We on this side are asking ourselves if it is deliberate or whether the opposition simply misunderstands. Having listened to the debate this morning, we fear that it is deliberate. We will take this opportunity to clarify the changes that were made to remind Canadians of the need for these changes. We will focus on what is actually being implemented so that those Canadians with work who fear that one day they might lose their jobs, as many of us do from time to time in our careers, and those without work, will understand these changes and how they could help them return to work more quickly when they need employment insurance.

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

[*Translation*]

Our country's economic performance continued to be strong in 2012. In fact, between July 2009 and March 2012, more than 900,000 new jobs were created. That is often mentioned.

However, what is not universally recognized in the country is that this represents by far the strongest employment growth among G-7 countries. Under the Conservative government, Canada has become a driver of job creation among the leading economies of industrialized countries.

A recent feather in our country's economic cap is that the OECD and the IMF have recently provided analysis that offers very encouraging long-term views of the Canadian economy. What they tell us is that, in the coming decades, if we continue to update our current policies, we have every chance—perhaps the best chance in the world—to create hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of jobs for future generations.

When we listen to the opposition, we often lose track of the sectors that have been creating the most jobs in the last three years. In the last 18 months alone, the manufacturing, financial and metal-producing sectors have been among the biggest and strongest job creators in Canada. Despite their best efforts, our partners and our competitors in other countries have much less positive records for their own economies.

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

● (1510)

[*English*]

That is why this year's economic action plan continues the hard work of implementing a long-term plan for jobs, economic growth and long-term prosperity. What does that mean? It means making sure that our capital markets function well, that they are competitive and that we attract capital from around the world. However, let us also make sure that our labour market functions well, that people are able to switch sectors when they have to, and that people requalify or retrain for new jobs when they lose jobs or businesses go bust, as sometimes they do. Let us continue to find the right people with the right experience to fill the skills gap and the labour shortages Canada faces today.

These are not challenges for the future in decades to come. These challenges are affecting us now. If left unchecked, they will hinder our ability to prosper as a country. Chief among these challenges is the growing skills shortage. It is a paradox that is of great concern to our government. We have too many unemployed in Canada, yet we have tens of thousands of jobs, hundreds of thousands according to some estimates, going unfilled.

[*Translation*]

Matching Canadian workers with available jobs in their local area is critical to supporting growth and productivity as well as quality of life for Canadians.

[*English*]

This is what we have always done in our country. The jobs of today are not the jobs our parents or grandparents had 50 years ago or 80 years ago. We have always adapted. We have always changed. We have always moved from the sawmill to the manufacturing plant to the digital software producing enterprise. That is the way the Canadian economy stays strong. This is why our common sense clarifications to EI ensure that the program remains fair and flexible and helps Canadians find jobs in their local labour markets.

What we are trying to do is make the labour market work better. We know that Canadians want to work. At the same time, we know that there are Canadians who are having difficulty finding work, particularly in the off-season in parts of the country that rely on seasonal industries. For those unable to work, we have good news. Employment insurance will continue to be there for them, as it always has been, despite what the opposition alleges. We will say it as often as we need to, inside or outside of the House. Fear-mongering will not work on Canadians.

In many cases, Canadians are not aware of the jobs available in their areas or of what types of jobs are relevant to their skills. That is the key part of this reform: giving Canadians more information. How can the opposition oppose that? We will help connect available workers with suitable work in their local areas.

Starting in January, just last month, we began sending job alerts twice a day to Canadians receiving EI. It is working.

*Business of Supply*

I sat in a taxi the other day and made the driver, a young Canadian, who just finished his Bachelor of Arts and is not working in the field he would like to work in, aware of this website, [www.workinginCanada.gc.ca](http://www.workinginCanada.gc.ca). Across the way they should mark it down. It deserves to be checked, especially after 2015. He went on that website, as I sat there, and found three or four jobs in his field, in his area. I do not know if he has taken one of those jobs. He is driving a taxi. It is his choice.

The system works. The information is out there. It is online. We have consolidated it. If people are unemployed and are receiving employment insurance they will receive that information and will be required to look at it and work through it. It is a good thing. It is going to make the labour market work better.

We have also introduced a connection between the EI program and the temporary foreign worker program to ensure that Canadians have first crack at jobs in their local areas. We are all grateful to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and Multiculturalism for his efforts in this area.

However, we also recognize that in many areas of the country there are legitimate labour shortages that are threatening our economic recovery. I can tell the House, from personal experience, that there are many areas experiencing chronic labour shortages in skilled and low-skilled occupations. Therefore, in addition to providing more information to Canadians on local jobs, we have also clarified what constitutes suitable employment and a reasonable job search. This is assisting Canadians currently collecting EI benefits in understanding their responsibilities while on claim.

[Translation]

Better utilizing Canada's workforce and making Canada's labour market more adaptable will help ensure our long-term economic growth.

[English]

To be clear, it has always been a requirement of the EI program that Canadians be looking for work while receiving benefits. We understand that every region of our country is different, with varying levels of economic opportunity, depending on the season and the business cycle. It has changed from decade to decade, from century to century, throughout our history. We also know that every individual has unique circumstances, and we will also take these into account. We are not asking EI claimants to uproot their families to find work in another part of the country or even another part of the province. We are not asking them to work at jobs that are far below their skill level. We are not forcing people to accept low wages or bad working conditions.

If one looks at GDP per capita in the country over the last six or seven years, while our government has been in office, it has gone up. The Gini coefficient income disparities are not deteriorating, as they are in other parts of the world. They are actually holding steady and are improving in some areas. We are creating opportunities. We are lifting people up to higher levels of opportunity and to a higher quality of life. We are not forcing people to accept low wages. If they cannot find work, EI will be there for them, as it always has been. What these changes are doing is ensuring that every EI claimant will

be better off working than not working. The fact is, Canadians collecting EI have to look for work.

The extra-five-weeks pilot program was created in 2008 and extended in 2010. It was always meant to be a temporary measure to support Canadians through the worst of the recession. Once economic conditions began to return to normal, the pilot was allowed to lapse. In fact, in a couple of regions covered by the pilot, it was ended early, because they had 12 continuous months of unemployment below 8%. One of the regions in the pilot had almost 5% unemployment for a significant period of time, so we took account of that.

● (1515)

We will continue to forge ahead with policies that matter to Canadians, focusing on their priorities, which are jobs, growth and long-term prosperity and, especially in the case of today's motion, a better functioning and more responsive labour market.

[Translation]

**Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP):**

Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask my hon. colleague a question about the specific case of on-call workers, particularly hospital orderlies.

These workers often replace employees on vacation in the summer. If they want to work, then they have to take whatever shifts are available here and there. In the winter, the people with regular positions take all the shifts. So there is a work shortage. But the on-call workers continue to have an employment relationship with their employer while receiving employment insurance benefits.

The logic of the labour market means that these people would receive employment insurance benefits for three or four years. They would then have accumulated enough seniority to never need it again. If they are forced to accept another job, no orderly would ever have enough seniority to get a full-time position.

Will these people who work on call in hospitals be forced to accept a job elsewhere?

**Mr. Chris Alexander:** Mr. Speaker, we will never force anyone who already has a job to accept another one. If a person is receiving employment insurance, that person is required to find employment.

If there are no opportunities other than seasonal employment, the person will be required to accept that job.

It all depends on the economic conditions of each region and the experience of the person in question. A nurse will not be forced to work as a machinist. Conditions will have to be set for each sector and each region.

The changes we are making are not revolutionary. They are improvements. We are providing information. We want people to be aware of the opportunities in their region.

*Business of Supply*

[English]

**Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I listened to the words of the member for Ajax—Pickering and they sounded awfully familiar to ones I heard from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development last week. Did they all come off the same word processor?

In any event, the he said that people were better off working than not working. That is absolutely true. I have no disagreement with that.

However, the fact is that the changes the government has made to employment insurance are penalizing people in areas where there is not full-time or three-quarter time work available. They are penalizing them for taking a day's work because they are drawing back half their wages from what used to be the case. Farmers are having trouble getting people to work for a day because if they work for a day, then they are getting half their money clawed back.

I see the parliamentary secretary walking across to whisper in the member's ear. Does she want to answer the question for him, or is the member for Ajax—Pickering going to answer the question himself?

This system is penalizing people for taking work. It is punitive and it hurts seasonal industries.

• (1520)

**Mr. Chris Alexander:** Mr. Speaker, I was just checking with several of my colleagues because the hon. member for Malpeque has asked exactly this question on several occasions. He has had precisely the answer I am about to give him because it is the truth.

The answer is the person can stick with the current system, as it works, or the revised system, which we think has advantages for many unemployed Canadians and will help them find new work.

The real question is this. How can the member for Malpeque and all members in his party and the NDP characterize the changes we are making as an attack on the unemployed and working Canadians, when in fact it is the exact opposite? It is an effort to give them information about jobs that exist in their region, to help them find out what skills they should acquire to get a better job, to get a second job if they want to have two part-time jobs, which is absolutely possible, to put people back to work.

The member opposite would have us sit with an unchanged system, reflecting the reality of the past. That is never the way Canada has moved forward and he knows it.

[Translation]

**Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet (Hochelaga, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my colleague, the member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

Today I rise in the House to speak in support of the motion tabled by my colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, who is the NDP employment insurance critic.

A number of my colleagues representing different parts of Quebec and Canada will be speaking to this motion today. I would like to join them today in underscoring the devastating effects of the Conservative government's EI reforms on the Montreal area.

Since the cuts announced by the Conservatives took effect last month, I have received hundreds of comments from my constituents in Hochelaga. They deplore these measures that jeopardize the welfare of their community, which has already been hard hit by unemployment and announcements of plant closures.

Over the next two years, hundreds more well-paying jobs will be lost, especially when the Mabe plant is shuttered.

What does the minister intend to tell these specialized, well-paid workers in East Montreal? To leave Montreal for a job in Fort McMurray? To accept a job at Tim Hortons?

The changes to the Employment Insurance Act fail to take into account the realities of regional labour markets and seasonal industries and adversely affect workers and communities.

Although there are not as many such workers in my riding as there are in eastern and northern Quebec ridings, Hochelaga has its share of bus drivers, substitute teachers, construction workers, daycare workers and botanical garden employees who work seasonally and who, as frequent EI claimants, will be affected by the Conservative reforms.

Montreal is also home to a large number of tourism industry and museum workers. I know something about this. They will be labelled frequent EI claimants and suffer the resulting consequences.

These workers, who typically claimed three times as many EI benefits and received these benefits for more than 60 weeks over the past five years, will have to look for similar work that pays 80% of their previous wage. Once they have received EI benefits for six weeks, they will have to accept any job for which they are qualified and that pays 70% of their previous wage.

Even though the reforms are mostly aimed at frequent claimants, all workers will be affected.

By forcing all unemployed persons to accept a lower-paying job than their previous one, the government is putting downward pressure on wages, something that will adversely affect the country's economy as a whole. By forcing unemployed workers to accept jobs far from home, the Conservatives are asking them to choose between travelling a long way to work or losing their benefits.

Asking a person who is unemployed and who cannot afford a car to buy a vehicle in order to travel to a job a long way from home and to accept a pay cut to boot defies logic.

The real problem is that there are not enough jobs.

As recently as yesterday, in response to a question from my colleague from Parkdale—High Park about the widening social inequality gap and our government's poor record on fighting poverty, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development had this to say:

...the best way to fight poverty is to create jobs and to have skilled people fill these jobs.

*Business of Supply*

Government ministers should really avoid making statements of this nature just to hide their own incompetence. In actual fact, 300,000 more people in Canada are out of work today than during the 2008 recession.

The Conservatives would have us believe that they have created countless new jobs, but the facts speak for themselves. Today, there are over 1.4 million unemployed Canadians for approximately 270,000 available jobs, or five unemployed workers for every available job.

Overall, 14.1% of Canadians between the ages of 15 and 25 are unemployed. Currently, only four out of every ten unemployed workers receive EI benefits. The numbers are at a historic low. The situation is worse than it was under the Mulroney, Chrétien and Martin governments, the uncontested champions when it came to wreaking havoc on the EI system and plundering the EI fund. The situation is truly unacceptable.

Whatever the minister would have us believe about the changes introduced by the Conservatives in their mammoth bill, we need to be clear about one thing: tightening EI eligibility rules and forcing workers to accept any job, be it one in another geographical area or one that pays less than their previous wage, is what she calls EI reform.

● (1525)

As if that were not enough, we learned just last Friday, February 1, that Service Canada inspectors must now meet EI cost-saving quotas.

Last Friday, I put a question to the Minister of Human Resources in the House and reminded her that Service Canada employees are supposed to help claimants, not track them like criminals. All the minister had to say in response to my question was this:

...as for the EI system, it is very important to note that, once again, the NDP is supporting the bad guys.

So then, if I understood the minister correctly, when the NDP asks her to stop treating unemployed workers like criminals and characterizing them as fraudsters in order to find savings at their expense and at the expense of their families by giving Service Canada inspectors quotas to meet, the only response she has is that the NDP is supporting the bad guys.

I would therefore like to remind the minister at this time that the NDP will always be there to defend Canadian families and to oppose Conservative policies that, by destroying the country's social safety net, hurt more people than they help.

The minister's response shows the arrogance of the Conservatives and the government's lack of respect for the unemployed and for workers. Their punitive reforms clearly reflect the negative, stereotypical view the Conservatives have of EI recipients.

And there is more. When asked by reporters about the fraud penalty quotas given to Service Canada inspectors, the minister replied that there were no quotas as such, but rather targets. Does anyone here in the House really see a difference between a quota and a cost-saving target? I thought about this all weekend long and I really do not see any difference. It is merely a question of semantics.

Another worrisome trend that we have observed with this government is the off-loading of costs onto the provinces. Even though the federal government is responsible for employment insurance, last-resort compensation programs fall under provincial jurisdiction.

So what happens when the federal government restricts EI eligibility by imposing unreasonable conditions on EI recipients who want to keep their benefits and by giving Service Canada inspectors quotas to meet? Well, the provinces ultimately end up having to pick up the tab.

After its omnibus bill on Criminal Code reform and its refusal to pledge to renew long-term agreements for social housing, the government is now refusing to compensate people for the unemployment it has created, sticking the provinces with the bill.

I cannot say it enough: employment insurance is insurance, and workers must be able to turn to it if they lose their jobs. It is a social safety net that workers and companies have paid into. The money in the employment insurance fund is not the government's money.

I encourage all members of the House to vote in favour of the motion of my colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, and I hope the government will finally listen to reason regarding its management of this file. Otherwise, the NDP will cancel these callous reforms imposed by the Conservative government when it leaves the Conservatives unemployed in 2015.

● (1530)

[*English*]

**Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, the member opposite is well aware that should Canadians be unable to find work in their local area that EI will continue to be there for them, as it always has been. Why does the member opposite continue to fearmonger on the issues when she knows full well that if individuals cannot find work, they will continue to receive EI?

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet:** Mr. Speaker, there is a basic principle that the Conservatives do not seem to understand.

First, not everyone can find full-time work. Second, when someone is looking for part-time work, it is sometimes difficult to find anything else.

Let us take the example of the museum where I worked for a long time. Of about 20 guides, 17 worked part-time. It was not because they did not want full-time work, but because full-time work was not available for 20 guides because the work depended on youth visits. So they worked on call.

These guides received 35 hours of training. When new guides are hired, they must undergo the 35 hours of training. That costs the employer a lot. When the guide does not work—when the young people do not visit, for example—the guide must resort to employment insurance to make ends meet. So the guide becomes a frequent claimant and will be penalized by being required to accept another job at 70%—

**The Speaker:** I have to interrupt the honourable member because other members wish to ask questions.

*Business of Supply*

The honourable member for Winnipeg–North.

[English]

**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, there are literally hundreds of thousands of unemployed Canadians from all communities in our country who want to work. There is a lot of attention paid to the high rates of unemployed youth. However, there is a special category that I think is underestimated in terms of the hardships they go through, and that is unemployed individuals in the 50 to 60 age bracket, who find themselves trying to get a job that is somewhat of equal value to the one they had.

Would the member not agree that these people, for the simple reason that their need to provide is far greater, are often paying the greatest price when they are not able to get their cheques in a timely fashion because of processing times or when they are encouraged to leave their community, when there are no jobs within their skill sets, because the government insists that they have to go to place X to get a job?

[Translation]

**Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet:** Mr. Speaker, I am particularly concerned about this issue because I myself fall into this category.

In times gone by, there were programs in the employment insurance system to train older workers and workers in general. There are fewer and fewer training programs.

In addition to making changes that have damaged the employment insurance system, the government is allocating less money to training programs. In my opinion, it should be doing the opposite. One of the reasons why it is no longer possible to provide as much training is that governments have, too often, dipped into the employment insurance fund. The money that belonged to workers and business people has disappeared.

**Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, clearly this is a very important debate. I thank my colleague for her important contribution to this debate.

The Conservatives do not seem to understand the concrete impact of this reform on families, particularly in rural regions. There are real impacts in both the forestry and tourism sector. Moreover, employers will obviously have to deal with a shortage of skilled workers.

In my colleague's opinion, are the residents of her riding concerned about this phenomenon and these changes?

• (1535)

**Ms. Marjolaine Boutin-Sweet:** Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, in my riding, there are bus drivers and people who work in the tourist industry. There is the Olympic Stadium and the Botanical Gardens. There are a lot of schools and people working in school cafeterias. These people need their income. Obviously, there are no cafeterias open in schools in the summer because the schools are closed. Employees of these cafeterias will be forced to reapply, year after year, for employment insurance.

Hochelaga is not a suburb for the wealthy. Residents of this neighbourhood are seeing their incomes drop, and they will not have enough money to make ends meet.

**Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, 2012 was a dramatic year for the economies of the resource

regions in Canada. My riding, Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, is a good example of the harmful, even destructive impact the employment insurance reforms will have on those regions.

I want to emphasize that many changes have been made to the employment insurance system. One of them concerns the matter of suitable employment. As a result of another change, people will be asked to travel an hour from their homes to find a job that may not even be suitable, depending on their employment history.

I also want to emphasize that it is not that easy to drive an hour in the regions in winter. It could even put claimants' lives in danger. I hope that was not the Conservatives' intention, but that is debatable. People are hurting in the resource regions. There simply are not enough jobs to meet the demand from all the workers who are unemployed in winter. We cannot disregard the fact that looking for jobs when there are none causes hardship.

The fact the government wants to cancel the pilot project to address the black hole will mean that many people in the resource regions will have no income for five weeks. If we also consider the fact that there is an automatic two-week waiting period at the start of the benefit period, that means they will have no income for a total of seven weeks a year. In addition, the Conservatives have decided to cut the number of weeks for which claimants may receive benefits. As we are now seeing, the black hole will be extended. Instead of continuing a pilot project to address the black hole that will meet people's needs, they are eliminating it completely. This is really a step backward.

I want to emphasize that people finding it difficult to get a job are not the only ones who will be affected. Employers will be in trouble in the spring. If the labour force does what the Conservatives constantly say it will do—they are trying to help unemployed workers find jobs—people definitely will not find those jobs in Gaspésie, but they may find them in Alberta.

If that is really what the Conservatives want, then I have a question for them. What will happen in the spring when there is a labour shortage in my riding, when the tourism industry does not have enough employees and fishing captains are without fisherman's helpers? I can tell people who like shrimp cocktail that they will have trouble finding any because there will be no fishermen to fish for shrimp.

I want you to understand that there is a reason why people stay put in the regions where work is seasonal, and that is precisely so the tourism, fishing and forest industries can operate during the necessary seasons, which are the seasons other than winter.

Our economy will lose its labour force, families and wealth, and that loss will be irrecoverable. Even the Conservatives can understand that, if people are chased away from our ridings, that will be a serious loss. They really must consider the hardship they will be causing in the ridings in remote regions and in all the seasonal industries, which are also located in urban areas. This is an aspect they have not considered.

*Business of Supply*

If there is one thing I really hold against this Conservative government, it is its almost total lack of consultation. The Conservatives draft bills with no consultation and are not prepared to amend them. They do not want to consult, either in parliamentary committees, or by going out into the regions of the country to talk to people about their bills. They just do not do it.

Here we have major changes to employment insurance, but officials tell me that Service Canada has not explained them. Yet people are supposed to know the law. It is a really difficult situation. Recipients of benefits have the right to be informed. Up to now, Service Canada has done a very bad job explaining the changes. Basically, it is up to my office to explain the employment insurance changes to my constituents. The government does not even have the brains to explain to people the changes it is making. I wanted to say the gall, but let us stick with brains. Instead, we get sound bites telling us that everything is fine. Everything is not fine.

● (1540)

But we can see that people in the regions are beginning to rise up in a major way. Thousands of people have taken to the streets in recent weeks. Some demonstrated yesterday and others are demonstrating today. They will continue to demonstrate in the days and weeks to come. People are very concerned by the changes being made to employment insurance and they have no choice but to take to the streets because, unfortunately, the Conservatives do not take the time to consult anyone.

I could mention the hon. member for Madawaska—Restigouche, who actually thinks that people are opposed to employment insurance reform because they cannot wait to go hunting. Frankly, that is treating people like dummies. I feel that people have the right to a little more respect than the Conservatives have shown them up to now.

In eastern Quebec, the many protests have had consequences. The minister—unfortunately for her, perhaps—had to backtrack on one aspect of employment insurance reform, the working while on claim pilot project.

In the past, people had the right to earn 40% more while on claim. As part of the 2012 reform, it was decided to abolish this pilot project and replace it with another one that would take 50% of people's income starting the moment they went to work.

The main consequence of the new pilot project is that people are refusing to work when a job becomes available. That is the complete opposite of what the Conservatives would have us believe. Instead of getting people into the labour market, they are poisoning work to the point that people are refusing to work. That is no way to run a pilot project.

If the government had bothered to consult the people, it might have seen that this was not working. Fortunately, the minister decided to backtrack following major opposition in eastern Canada. Now people who want to can go back to the old rules and earn 40% of their income.

In my riding, employers are very happy, because people are starting to go back to work. That is what we want; we want people to work. However, the Conservatives' reform will have the opposite effect. It will prevent people from looking for work. It is truly

impressive to see just how badly the Conservatives botched their employment insurance reform.

Still, the fact that people now have a choice is a good thing. They can earn 40% of their income, if they want. The problem is that the Conservatives have done everything in their power to make the new pilot project for working during a benefit period as unpleasant and difficult as possible.

Instead of filling out the familiar employment insurance cards using the telephone or online system, they have to go back to the old system of manual cards, which is obviously going to cause significant delays.

As well, they have to contact Service Canada to make an informed choice. In other words: pick up the phone, dial the Service Canada number, and sit on the phone for hours. No one answers the call, because the government has cut Service Canada services to the point that there are not enough staff to meet the employment insurance related needs. It is quite simply not working.

The Conservatives are trying to save money on the backs of workers by eliminating the positions of the people who handle employment insurance cases. Unfortunately, that creates a situation in which the service is not there and people cannot figure out whether they should choose the old rules or not, because the agents do not have time to assess their cases.

I will add this: under the new rules, a person has to provide proof of all the job searches they have done. If they are spending all day on the phone, it will be hard for them to prove they have been looking for a job.

They are doing everything they can to prevent people from receiving employment insurance. We also have to wonder whether the provinces will end up stuck with a giant mess once people no longer have access to employment insurance. In other words, people will be applying for social assistance or will move to other regions of the country.

The bill is poorly drafted. All of the EI bills were designed to hurt claimants and employers. If the Conservatives had taken the time to consult people, we might have had some reasonable reforms, but they did not. What they should do now is scrap all of the 2012 EI reforms, start from scratch and seek real consultation.

I urge them to come visit my riding, to ask the people what needs to be done to provide access to jobs and to create jobs. How can we move forward with an employment insurance program that will help employers and employees? How can we create a full employment situation in a resource region like mine, where there is a shortage of jobs during the winter months?

● (1545)

That is what they need to do. They must consult the public. Unfortunately, the Conservatives seem completely incapable of doing so. Lastly, I recommend that they resign en masse. Then, once an election is held, we can have a real government with MPs who truly address the needs of the public.

*Business of Supply*

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to say that I agree with the hon. member. Across the country, there is a movement of young people, the unemployed and others, but not the kind of movement he is talking about. People who want to work, whether in the Gaspé region, in Ontario, in Quebec or elsewhere in the country, are on the move. They support the changes that we have introduced because they improve their chances of finding work in their preferred field.

I have a question for the hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine concerning the speech by his colleague from Hochelaga. She implied early on in her statement that a job at Tim Hortons did not amount to much. But if a young person who has no experience in another field thinks that a job at Tim Hortons is suitable for him simply because he wants to work, is working there not better? Does the hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine agree with me, or does he side with his colleague?

**Mr. Philip Toone:** Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague opposite for his question. It is a valid one.

People are on the move right now looking for work. The situation is similar to what we witnessed during the 1930s when the government sent people to work in work camps. The government hid them in the woods and hoped they would be content with quarrying rocks all day long. Perhaps that is what people should do instead of working at Tim Hortons. They should work in a rock quarry. That would be making judicious use of people with a university education.

In the meantime, maybe the member should wake up to the fact that if that happens, the opposite could come to pass, that is to say people will mobilize in Ottawa to demand genuine reforms and will continue to press their point until the government starts listening to them.

The people who are rising up today are people who need help, who want to work and who want to contribute to their region's prosperity. Unfortunately, the Conservatives are trying to strip the regions of their wealth and to send everyone to regions where jobs are more plentiful. That is all well and good, but how will seasonal industries cope if there is a manpower shortage?

[English]

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine for his comments. He hit many of the major points.

He was wrong about one, though. He said that the pressure on the working while on claim program forced the Conservatives to fix the program. What it forced them to do is to put up a face and let on that they fixed the program. There is no fix there. People are still being disparaged and pretty much bullied into opting into the new program. However, the member made some very clear and concise points.

As to the comment that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence made, that they can take a job at Tim Hortons, a lot of people are feeding their families on those Tim Hortons jobs in the region that my colleague represents and in the

region I represent. It is not students in those jobs and there are not a lot of job openings at Tim Hortons.

People are being hurt by the changes the government made. The Conservatives want to throw a cloak around it, saying that anyone who receives EI is a bad person. Would it not have made more sense just to hire more compliance officers? There are abuses in the system. Let us root out those abusers rather than treating everybody like criminals.

• (1550)

[Translation]

**Mr. Philip Toone:** Mr. Speaker, I thank the member of the other opposition party for his question.

May I start by pointing out that his party was the first to plunder the EI fund. What the Conservatives are doing today is wrong, but they are merely following the example set by the Liberal Party when the Chrétien government was in power. I totally blame his party for the fact that employers and workers are losing a tremendous amount of money. The EI fund is now seriously underfunded. The blame for that rests with the Chrétien government. In my opinion, the Liberal Party should apologize today to Canadians.

[English]

**Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Avalon.

I am pleased to speak to the motion, which asks the government to reverse the devastating changes it has made to employment insurance, and further, to reinstate the extra five weeks pilot project. I support unequivocally those two points.

The changes the Conservative government has made to employment insurance are punitive, ill-conceived and penalize seasonal workers. I want to emphasize that it penalizes seasonal industries and will undermine the seasonal economy. The seasonal economy in this country is responsible for about 20% of our exports. It is responsible for a substantial amount of our GDP. In fact, those seasonal industries require skilled workers. If those seasonal industries and seasonal businesses are to survive, prosper and contribute to the Canadian economy, it has to be understood that they require skilled workers to come back.

As a farmer, I have a neighbour who runs a multi-million dollar operation. He has three full-time employees year round and there are three seasonal employees. He has had those seasonal employees coming back every year for somewhere between 10 and 15 years, depending on the person. They know how to run a \$300,000 piece of equipment. They know his operation well. He does employ them sometimes two days a week in the summer, and so those folks with skills are there for him in the following season.



*Business of Supply*

The punitive penalties the government is putting in place with the EI changes will affect that person substantially. The employees who work for him are penalized 50¢ on the dollar for the two days they work. That is a penalty. They want to work. They want to earn more income. They want to spend the income they earn in the economy, and the government is taking that away with these changes.

I see the parliamentary secretary frowning. I wish she would come down to meet some of those people. The fact of the matter is that if those people are penalized, they have to look at whether or not they should stay in their communities, whether or not they should leave their families, whether or not they should go to work in Fort McMurray or whatever. This does two things. It affects the community and it affects that farmer's business. It does a third thing as well. It affects the families. The economy as a whole would be injured.

These changes came in, and I look at the parliamentary secretary again, and were done without consultations with the provinces. They did not have any real hearings in this place. There was absolutely no cost-benefit analysis done in terms of the economy. I would submit that these changes not only hurt the workers, they will undermine our seasonal industries and the businesses that operate in those seasonal industries.

I find it remarkably strange, and I listened to a lot of the speakers here today, that words are being expressed by government MPs that do not in any way at all have any relationship with the reality on the ground for the people who are affected by these changes. Conservative backbench MPs are quite brave to stand up in this place and spout the government's talking points, or the ones that the parliamentary secretary allows them to spout. However, they seem very reluctant to explain these changes beyond this place.

• (1555)

I will reference the *Moncton Times & Transcript*, Saturday, February 2, 2013 with the headline, "Labour groups demand EI meetings". It says:

A new coalition of anti-poverty and labour groups from across New Brunswick is asking the province's eight Conservative MPs to set up public meetings to explain controversial changes to the employment insurance program.

It goes on to say in the article that most Conservative MPs stayed away from any such meetings.

In fact, last Thursday night I attended a meeting in Alberton, Prince Edward Island, that was called by those concerned about the employment insurance changes. That is the riding of the Minister of National Revenue. The seasonal workers there expressed lots of concerns. However, I was shocked by the initial remarks of the chair of that meeting. The chair, from the microphone at the meeting, directed the media not to take any photographs of people who were speaking at the microphones because she had been informed by the people there that they were fearful that if their photographs were taken, HRSDC might retaliate against them in some way.

This is Canada. People should not be operating out of fear in this country, but that is what they are doing. We hear it all the time from people on the phone who call in to our office.

The parliamentary secretary laughs, but this is no joking matter. The fact of the matter is that this is what people are saying on the phone to us.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**The Speaker:** Order, please. There will be a questions and comments period following the speech. If members would like to pose or make comments about the hon. member's speech, I would invite them to do so at that time and not during his remarks.

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am just telling the facts. People are actually afraid.

I heard the member for Ajax—Pickering saying earlier that they can go back on the old system because the Conservatives made that change. That is true. They did make that change, but when people call in and ask to go on that system, they are encouraged not to by HRSDC staff. They are told that they will have to do paper returns, not electronic, and that it will take longer and, by golly, if there is a postal strike, their family may have nothing to eat. Those were words that were told to us by people who looked at going onto the old system, where they would do much better. I would ask the two parliamentary secretaries to think this issue through.

I said a moment ago that seasonal industries are responsible for somewhere around 20% of our exports. However, those industries are being injured by these changes because their workers are indeed affected.

I also want to mention one of the things that came up at the meeting in Alberton loud and clear. People did not know this when they applied, but for those who are seasonal workers and applied to take their Canada pension plan at 60, the way it works is that they take their monthly Canada pension plan, multiply it by 12 to get the yearly amount and divide that by 52 to get their weekly CPP. However, 50 cents on the dollar of that CPP has been drawn back. That is unacceptable, but that is what the Conservative government is doing to seasonal workers. It is even taking the pension that they paid into away from them.

Just as bad, for people who are on parental leave, for example, nurses who are going in to work a four-hour or six-hour shift to keep their licence up, help the hospital out and keep their skills up so that when they go back to work in the health care system they can hit the ground running, they are having 50 cents on the dollar of their parental leave clawed back. These are the punitive penalties that we are seeing.

The five week pilot project that was mentioned a couple of times is being taken away without any economic analysis whatsoever. It is penalizing people further and leaving families without incomes for an additional five weeks when they are probably already without incomes for another four or five weeks. It will probably force some onto the welfare system. However, there was no need to do that. There was money in the system. Why did the government not hold hearings on the consequences of what these decisions would be?

I submit, they must reverse these decisions and reinstate the five-week pilot project.

*Business of Supply*

●(1600)

**Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments by the member opposite, but I would like to inform him about what is being said in my riding of Simcoe—Grey. I have a very large seasonal industry, in fact several, whether apple growers, potato growers, or the large tourism industry with the ski resorts of Ontario. They are all pleased about these changes because these better connect people with local jobs. The changes provide opportunities for people to stay local and utilize their skills so they do not have to move away.

The member really just wants to fearmonger. He wants to put in the mindset of Canadians things that are simply not true. I was in Prince Edward Island two weeks where I held a series of round tables. Every person who raised the issue wanted clarification, and once clarified, as opposed to being fearful, they were pleased with the changes and were going out to talk to their colleagues. Those are the facts. That is what happened in Prince Edward Island two weeks ago.

Why does the member opposite continue to want to disparage Service Canada personnel, those people who are so professional in trying to help better connect Canadians with jobs? Why does he not go out and provide Canadians with opportunities to better connect with jobs, as opposed to fearmongering? What is he going to say to those Service Canada professionals in his area where they are doing such a fabulous job?

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** Mr. Speaker, I talk quite often to the professionals who work for Service Canada in Prince Edward Island. They do a good job. They are trying to help out. They are stressed and frustrated. In fact the office in Montague was closed by the government. It has closed 99 out of 122 offices across this country. I am pleased if the member is hearing good things in her riding about the changes. That is a wonderful thing, but this is a huge country. We have many regions, many different industries and seasonal industries that differ across the country. In Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec and northern Ontario, the changes are not working.

Accommodate the changes, parliamentary secretary, that people need.

The changes that have been made are punitive and penalizing. The government had no consultations whatsoever and I would love to know whom she talked to in Prince Edward Island. Was it the member for Egmont, because certainly the people I am hearing from have an entirely different story.

**Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, my riding has had some of the highest unemployment over the last number of years and the lack of consultation has been tragic, as the member noted, because it is one of the key factors. In Essex, just outside my area, the lack of consultations on the beyond the border agreement is potentially going to lead to the closure of three canning facilities, and hundreds of farms will go as well because of that situation.

I would like the member to talk more about the agricultural element. We have been to Washington together a number of times to argue for improved services and improved programs. These cuts are

going to significantly hurt those people. I would like the member to expand upon that, please.

**Hon. Wayne Easter:** Mr. Speaker, indeed, the agriculture industry is seriously affected, some commodities more than others. We have three major industries affected by these changes in my province: fisheries, agriculture and tourism, all of them seasonal industries that shut down at about the same time.

In terms of the cash crops and potato industry, when they shut down after harvest they do require workers some time over the winter months. It might only be for a day or two a week. However, the way the changes have been made, when someone goes back for that one day's work, their income from that day is clawed back 50¢ on the dollar off their employment insurance. Under the old system they were allowed to make \$75, which was a good thing. It contributed to the economy, helped the individuals concerned and helped the families. They wanted to go to work, but now people are afraid and asking if they can be paid in cash. Employers cannot do that either. It is illegal.

It is forcing people out of the region. They are saying that their families cannot survive. That is the impact this is having on the seasonal industries in my province.

I would submit to the parliamentary secretary that maybe she could go to the provincial report done by the Progressive Conservatives and the Liberal government, which is very much against these changes.

●(1605)

**Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in the House and support this motion on employment insurance. Coming from a rural part of this great country, I realize how important this is to so many seasonal workers. I have thousands of fish plant workers in my riding and they depend on employment insurance to help them get through the winter season.

This is not a program they want to be on; it is just in the nature of where they live in this country of ours. That is why we are standing up for this. The current government has no interest whatsoever in the EI program. That was easily seen when the minister said a few years ago that she did not want to make the EI system too lucrative. I can tell the House that what these employees are getting while on EI is far from lucrative.

Really galling is the fact that during the debate when the minister introduced these new measures, she said there was nothing to worry about because the changes would only impact about 1% of those on EI. That statement itself was totally false and misleading. That 1% on EI meant that it would only impact about 5,000 people, but, guess what? It does not impact 5,000 people. It impacts tens of thousands of people. That is what has people really upset and worked up. They cannot believe anything the government says when it comes to EI.

Whether an employer or employee, when people are working there is one class they pay into equally based on what they make, that being the EI system. Now the government wants to make three different classes of people who would draw upon this particular system, which makes no sense. It makes people feel degraded. It is bad enough when people lose their job, but now they will be thrown into one of three classes of recipients for employment insurance.

*Business of Supply*

The restructuring of these pilot projects was not necessary. The existing pilot projects were there for six-plus years and were working fine. They were addressing some of the concerns. They were working well. People knew what they could do. The member for Malpeque just gave the example of someone working while on a claim, who could keep 50% of what he or she made. The government had taken away these disincentives to work.

I would also elaborate on the comment by the member for Malpeque on people taking cash under the table. That is one of the reasons these pilot projects were created in the first place, in order to remove the incentive for businesses to pay cash under the table. Now we are reverting back to that. It is like going back 10 years because businesses will pay people cash under the table if they cannot find employees. That is wrong and it should not be supported.

The government wants to catch the people who are defrauding the system. However, the power was already there. The recipients had to seek employment and were called upon at times to produce proof of where they had sought employment. The system was there and was working fine. Now the Conservatives are saying there is a group of people out there, the seasonal workers, whom they want to go out and attack and make them drive an hour or an hour and a half to work at some minimum wage, low-paying job at McDonald's. The minister herself said that these people need to go and work at McDonald's, which is absolutely deplorable.

One of these changes that really gets me is that making the review tribunal process more difficult. There is a tribunal out there. When things happen and people are denied EI they are given a fair hearing and a fair shake at the review tribunal. Now the Conservatives would be cutting out all of the local review tribunals across the country and the local knowledge, the people who know the circumstances that these employees are in, and moving it all to Ottawa. It is great to move everything and centralize it here in central Canada. However, it will be tough for us to represent those people who come before the tribunal themselves to make their case.

• (1610)

I have one person in my office who works on EI appeals for me and goes to the review tribunal and the board of referees. It is a lot of work. He puts a lot of effort into representing my constituents. I do not know what I would do without him because he is essential in helping these people navigate through the confusing tribunal process. However, now we are not going to do it on the ground in Newfoundland. People will not be able to go and represent themselves. It will all be done here in Ottawa.

This is not the government's money; the employers and employees pay into the fund themselves. The government did not consult with Canadians when it made the changes. Governments, over the years, squandered the EI surpluses away. Right now, in our province, more training money is needed to help people retrain and get them into the new megaprojects and the growth that we are experiencing in Newfoundland. The government is not putting any money at all into training.

It is a long way, an hour and a half, to drive for a minimum wage job. These people want to work. They would love it if the fish plant in their community were open year round, but that is not always possible because the government sets the opening and closing dates

of the fisheries. It is not possible for them to work in the fish plant all year around. It is very hard, labour-intensive work. These employees work very hard when they are in the fish plant in the fishing season.

When employers have good paying seasonal jobs in seasonal industries, it is important that they can rely on their employees to do the job. I have an example of a bus company in my riding. The owner is one of the hardest working individuals I know. He works hard making sure he has a successful bus company. He has a fleet of buses and depends on the seasonal or tourist nature of the work. He needs good bus drivers. Just recently, he had one of his bus drivers, who was a seasonal employee, taken away from him. Service Canada called the employee and said there was a job for him and he had to go and take that job.

Whether for a week, two weeks, or a whole season, that takes this employee away. The owner had spent \$15,000 training that bus driver. It is not possible to just pull someone off the street to drive a motor coach. The government says it wants to help business survive and that it is going to help struggling businesses, yet this employer just spent time and money investing in a good quality bus driver and now that bus driver is gone. Now this small company has to start all over again. It will have to invest another \$15,000 in another seasonal employee. What is frustrating is that sometime during the winter season he might get the odd call for a motor coach to take a group somewhere, and he cannot call that employee up because he has been taken away.

One of the things the member for Cape Breton—Canso has been saying is that these employees are being encouraged not to work in this pilot project. I have an example of an employee who worked at a fish plant. I will try to keep the story fairly short, but she worked there for 34 or 35 weeks and did well. Then she went and collected her employment insurance for a week. Then she was called back to work for a whole week and did not receive any EI at all. Then she went back on EI to finish off the season. She called the other day and wanted to revert back to the old system of EI pilot project, which she thought she would be able to do because the government said she would have the choice to go back to the old system. She was denied the opportunity to go back to the old system. Why? It is because when she was working while on claim, she did not collect. If an employee does not collect, he or she does not qualify to go back to the old system.

The government likes to say that the economy is fragile. Yes it is. The fishing industry is fragile. This year she may not have an opportunity to go back for a full week's work. It might be for only one or two days. However, the government will not let her go back to the old EI system. It is absolutely ridiculous. It is sad that this is happening.

There is confusion out there. We have had meeting upon meeting with fish plant workers in the riding who are so concerned that these EI changes are so detrimental to their work.

Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. It is a pleasure to add my two cents and my experiences to this EI debate. I would welcome any questions.

*Business of Supply*

●(1615)

*[Translation]*

**Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I congratulate my colleague on his speech. I would like to hear what he has to say about the positions taken by our Conservative colleagues a little earlier when we were debating the NDP motion. Some Conservatives had the effrontery to say that it is not at all to put downward pressure on workers' salaries or standards of living, though the entire system is punitive.

Telling people about available jobs is one thing, but this reform is a systematic beating. If you are a bad guy without a job, you will get 90% of your former salary. If you use the system again, you will get 80% of your former salary. If that does not work, you will get 70%. After that, you get nothing except welfare, meaning that the provinces are going to be paying the unemployed.

How can they seriously claim in this House that the reform is not anti-labour and anti-social and that it is not going to make Quebecers and Canadians poorer? I would like to hear my colleague's comments on that.

*[English]*

**Mr. Scott Andrews:** Mr. Speaker, absolutely it will hinder the lives of people in the country. It is tough when people leave a low-paying job and then they are expected to find a job that pays even less. They are then pushed onto the social assistance rolls.

The government is downloading these responsibilities to the provinces. There is really no need because the EI system is not bankrupt. It is well funded by employees and they need it at this time.

Where this is going is punitive. It is a pilot project that is regressive to the EI system.

**Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the presentation of my colleague from Avalon, although he referenced that people could work at McDonald's. I know in a lot of areas I represent, there are 50 volunteer fire departments and only one McDonald's in my entire constituency. In rural communities a lot of these low-paying jobs do not exist outside the season.

When the premier of a province, Pauline Marois, met with the Prime Minister, what did she speak about? She spoke about EI. Premier Ghiz is supported by the other two major parties in P.E.I. They have been very active in opposing these EI changes.

Could he at least share with the Conservatives some basic math? As one example, there is the change on working while on claim. I cannot believe they have not figured this out yet. Suppose people get called in to sort potatoes on a farm in P.E.I., they come in at \$10 an hour and work an eight hour shift and that is their additional money. Under the old system, they were able to keep that \$80. Under the current system, they now get clawed back \$40. We can throw in transportation on that. It is eight hours of work for \$40.

It is punitive. Does my colleague understand just how punitive it is? Workers are being bullied to go into the new system. Hence they are being put in a position where they have to make the choice not to take that work, or it has to be paid under the table.

●(1620)

**Mr. Scott Andrews:** Mr. Speaker, I have an example in my constituency, where three people are refrigerator workers in a fish plant. Three workers keep that fish plant going all season long. All three are employed for the full season. In the off season and in the slow part of the season, one of them can come in and do one day's work. Another can come in on another day and the other on another day.

If one person comes in to work and loses money, then the next person comes in and loses money as well. It makes no sense. The math does not add up. Then the worker is told that he or she can go work at an ice rink in St. John's. Now that person has to travel two hours to an ice rink to do that same one hour of work.

The system was working. The three individuals got their one day's work and were able to keep what they made. Now each worker is getting wages clawed back.

The system is not there to help these employees get through tough times.

**Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to rise and add my voice, and the voices of my constituents, to this important debate.

First, this is the issue that takes the most time of my staff in my office. People are calling, raising concerns, and it is not just employees, not just people who are looking for help from the system, but it is also employers.

We heard recently from the owner of a paving company in Dartmouth who, as other employers have said, was concerned about the fact that the measures being brought in by the government were literally driving seasonal workers out of our region of Atlantic Canada.

That is affecting this business owner. It affects fishermen, boat owners, owner-operators who operate a few months of the year. It affects tourism owners and operators in Nova Scotia, in Atlantic Canada and in fact throughout the country. It affects people in the tourism sector because our tourism sector is seasonal. It affects people in the agriculture sector. In other words, it affects the whole economy of Atlantic Canada.

What many of us who have talked with our constituents, governments and others in our provinces and in our constituencies cannot understand is why the government, which claims to not want to do any harm to the economy and is focused 100% on the economy and making things prosperous, would bring in measures like this that are devastating the economy in one region of the country, in particular, Atlantic Canada.

It is happening without consultation with employers and with premiers. The premier of Nova Scotia has expressed his disappointment and, frankly, his disgust at the lack of consultation on this issue.

*Business of Supply*

We, in Atlantic Canada, in Nova Scotia, have a seasonal economy. There is no doubt about that. Whether it be in the fishing industry or for seasonal companies like this paving operator, they depend on people in the community being available when they are needed. They train them and invest money in them because they are there on a regular basis.

The owner of the paving company told us that he trained his workers to ensure they did not get injured on the job. If they are not there, then he has to invest in more training every year for the new employees, if he is lucky to find them.

I have heard the same concerns raised by owner-operators in the fishing industry, in the lobster industry. It is a very dangerous, if not one of the most dangerous, occupations we have. The people who are there are concerned about the lack of training for issues like health and safety.

Before I go much further, I will be sharing my time with a colleague to be mentioned later.

One of the first calls I received was from a fish boat captain who was concerned about the health and safety of the crew he had on his boat. He has the same people every year, and has had for many years. People who have ever been on a boat when they are out fishing for lobster know it is fast moving, it is chaotic and it is dangerous. If people do not know what they are doing, then there are very serious health and safety concerns.

• (1625)

This skipper said that this would mean he would not only be potentially putting everybody in the boat at risk, because he would have people who perhaps were not as well-trained as they should, but he would be incurring additional costs every year in order to train these employees.

That is what the operator of the paving company said when he called our office. That is what we have heard from farmers. That is what we have heard from tourism operators, operators of inns, restaurants and other seasonal activities.

What the government has done is add a greater burden onto the backs of small businesspeople who are trying to cobble together a living, who are keeping our communities in rural Canada, in rural Atlantic Canada in this case, which is what I am focused on. Not only is the government focusing its attention to bring down unemployed workers to, in effect, depopulate places like Atlantic Canada, not only attacking unemployed workers, but it is also attacking small businesspeople in communities throughout Atlantic Canada.

People are asking me to try to find out why the government, which says it is pro-business and pro-economy, is picking winners and losers. Why has it decided that Atlantic Canada, small businesses, seasonal industries, will be losers under the Conservative government?

That was not part of the Conservatives' election campaign in 2011. They did not tell small businesspeople in Atlantic Canada that they were coming for them. They did not tell the unemployed that they were coming for them. They did not tell seniors that they were coming for them. However, that is exactly what they have done with

these measures. All the measures they have brought in, as they deal with employment insurance, are penalizing workers and small businesses. There is no question in my mind that is wrong.

Do members know what has been going on lately? I have been increasingly getting calls in my office from people who cannot even get through to the 1-800 number. People who are trying to follow these rules, who are recognizing that they are going to be punished and they are going to be punished more if they do not follow the rules, cannot even get through to the employment insurance office, to Service Canada. People are calling by the half-hour, day in and day out, to try to get through.

What do these people get? They get a message that says to call back at a time when there is less call volume. The people who have called my office have said that they have done that, that they have called early in the morning, that they have called at the end of the day, but it does not seem to matter.

I have spoken with half a dozen constituents directly who have indicated to me that it took them a week in one case and a week and a half in another case to get through after calling persistently hour after hour.

Constituents of Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, people in the fishing industry who have talked to me, people in Atlantic Canada who have raised concerns with me have asked me why the government has attacked unemployed workers. I have been asked why it has attacked small businesspeople, in particular, the seasonal industries.

Why is the government trying to depopulate Atlantic Canada? Why has it decided that the prosperous Canada that it says it is trying to build will not include Atlantic Canada?

The people in my constituency, the people in Nova Scotia and the people throughout Atlantic Canada want some of those answers from the government.

• (1630)

**Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I sat and listened to the member opposite speak about what he believes is happening in the employment insurance program. I encourage the member opposite to state the facts as opposed to creating this mythology of what he thinks is occurring. He should read the facts of what is actually happening.

In ridings like my own, where people have read the facts, where they know exactly what is going on, they have come to realize that this is an excellent program and these are great changes. It better connects Canadians to jobs in their local area so that they have opportunities.

I would like to ask the member opposite a simple question. Has he gone to [www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca) and looked at the great tools that are available so that he can tell his local constituents exactly how they can better connect themselves to a local job, because that is what our government has done? We have created 920,000 net new jobs through tools exactly like this. Does he even know about this website? Has he instructed his constituents to consider looking at it?

*Business of Supply*

**Mr. Robert Chisholm:** Mr. Speaker, that was an interesting question and it goes to the other issue that people raise with me when they call. They ask me why the government thinks that working people in Atlantic Canada are lazy. They ask me why the government thinks they are all crooks. They ask me why the government thinks they are ignorant and that they cannot and do not want to work, that they do not want a job. I have told these people who have raised these questions with me that the government tells us that each and every day. It tells us that the people of Atlantic Canada do not want to work, that unemployed Atlantic Canadians are engaging in fraud, that they are bad people, that they need to go out west somewhere in order to find a job and that, if the people of Atlantic Canada are not able to get answers to the questions they have because they cannot even get through on the 1-800 number, it is because they are not trying hard enough or they simply do not understand.

[Translation]

**Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like the hon. member to talk about the repressive aspect of this reform.

This policy does not encourage employers to increase salaries or provide better working conditions. It encourages them to offer lower salaries, salaries equivalent to 70% of workers' previous salaries. It requires job seekers to accept jobs at 70% of their previous salary.

What does the hon. member think? Where is this taking us? We know that household debt is increasing and salaries are decreasing. So, what is the current situation and what does the future look like for his province?

•(1635)

[English]

**Mr. Robert Chisholm:** Mr. Speaker, my colleague asked an important question. Where are we headed under the Conservative government?

Maybe the rest of Canada is prosperous, although that is not what I am hearing. The people of Atlantic Canada, especially unemployed people and people who work in seasonal industries, feel that they are being attacked by the Conservative government. Their wages are being lowered. If they happen to be unemployed, their wages are being driven down. Companies are allowed to bring in foreign workers and pay them 15% less to do the same work.

The Conservative government is not doing anything to help create jobs in Atlantic Canada. The government is ensuring that small business people and seasonal industries cannot operate and provide the jobs that they need to provide.

**Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, we do need to recognize some of the regional disparity out there. One could do a comparison in terms of the current parliamentary secretary living an hour outside of Toronto. The fact is that there is a substantial difference in unemployment rates and job opportunities.

I am wondering if the member might want to provide a comment on those types of inequities, that to a certain degree some people have an advantage over others. That does not give the government just reason to try to depopulate one area because of an advantage or a disadvantage of that nature.

**Mr. Robert Chisholm:** Mr. Speaker, the member makes a good point. There is not a lot of public transit outside of metro in Nova Scotia. There is not a lot of public transit outside of the metropolitan area in Cape Breton. There is not a lot of public transit in areas outside of Toronto, in Prince Edward Island or in Newfoundland.

The government is setting standards on the basis of downtown Toronto or some other kind of economy. It just simply does not exist from one end of the country to the other, and that is why it is so unfair, the way it is penalizing economies like the one in Atlantic Canada.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, before I begin, I would like to thank the hon. member for Dartmouth—Cole Harbour for his speech and for the verbal skill with which he fights for his constituents.

As you see, I am wearing a symbolic black hole on my lapel today, to represent the black hole or spring gap in EI and the fight against it by workers opposed to this odious EI reform.

I would like to take this opportunity on an opposition day to express my concerns and those of my constituents regarding the Conservative government's draconian changes to employment insurance.

Need I remind the minister that the Conservatives did not consult the people of Canada and Quebec on this proposal? Nor did they even mention their plan to restrict employment insurance during the last election.

We are all aware that this assault against our regional economies and workers in seasonal industries is causing anger and a profound feeling of injustice among those who contribute to this system, the real owners of the EI fund.

Recently, demonstrations took place at Service Canada offices all across the country. That wave of protest set off by the Conservatives will wash over the eastern part—and all parts—of Canada, because the cause is just and the demands are justified.

This reform affects everyone, not only the employees and employers who contribute, but also the entire middle class, which will be irresistibly drawn toward the big cities.

The Conservative government must reconsider its position with regard to seasonal workers and stop trying to make voters believe that draining resources from rural regions is a solution to the lack of work.

I hope that the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development is listening to us now, because we do not understand the reason behind this fury and obsession against the regions. Why make cuts to a self-financing program and thereby deprive thousands of families of insurance against the loss of employment revenue?

The minister is being very naive or blindly optimistic when she claims that her reform will put people back to work. What we see on the ground is bafflement at the federal government's refusal to acknowledge the negative effects of this reform, such as the exodus of skilled workers from the regions and the breakdown of the social fabric there.

*Business of Supply*

The Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development ought to remember or be more aware of the human aspect right there in her department's name. To me, it seems that "human resources" includes the notion of humanity.

The minister tells us that she really wants to manage the EI fund better. And how? By asking her departmental staff to set off on a witch hunt, by asking them to meet quotas of \$40,000 in cuts each month per inspector, at a time when less than 40% of potential claimants qualify for employment insurance benefits.

I think it is conceivable that some people commit fraud. But what is not conceivable is the Conservative government's unhealthy tendency to act as judge and jury in such affairs and make an assumption of guilt regarding those who really need the powerful economic tool that EI can be.

Do these few cases of fraud justify all this upheaval? Is it necessary to mete out so much punishment? Is it necessary to scrape whole regions down their bare bones so that people of good faith and honest workers are caught in a tight net and receive the same prisoner-like treatment as the few who commit fraud? The answer is no.

It is inhumane that the Conservative minister, wearing a mask of justice and sound management, makes the honest citizens, the majority, suffer the consequences of the misdeeds of a minority.

Should the government's priorities not be quality of life, economic security, pride and the regional economies we heard so much talk about during the last campaign?

• (1640)

With the current reform, a seasonal worker falls into the category of a frequent user and becomes suspect or, in the minister's words, a bad guy. For example, after two months of benefits—which means in early summer—workers who are skilled operators of the specialized machinery at the Mont-Sainte-Anne ski centre in Beaufort will have to accept any job within 100 km of their home, and at a lower salary.

In such cases, it is not only the workers who are penalized, but also the employer who trained them, who will have to start over every year to train its workforce. Employers will no longer have access to skilled workers. Many sectors of activity in the cities, such as construction, education and community organizations, will be penalized for recruiting and retaining their employees. Has the government considered the additional costs for such employers?

We are therefore asking the Conservative government to re-establish the pilot project providing five additional weeks to avoid the 17-week black hole that seasonal workers are currently facing on the upper north shore and in Charlevoix.

We must quickly terminate this reform, which did enough damage last January 6. The reform is restricting access to benefits, putting downward pressure on wages and driving workers in our area into poverty, not to mention the fact that it is the provinces that will bear the increased costs of social programs.

The Conservatives and their minister have been turning a deaf ear for too long. They accuse seasonal workers of being frauds, and in the same breath, they claim that the program is there for those who

really need it. I call upon all these right-minded champions of virtue to come and tell my fellow citizens to their faces that henceforth they will have to drive 200 km, accept a 30% pay cut and get ready to serve as cheap labour.

Let them come and tell people who, because of the nature of the industry that employs them, will not be going back to work until early May that they and their family of three children are not in need, when they have just received their last week of employment insurance benefits. For them, what lies ahead is a black hole. They do not have a penny to pay rent or buy groceries.

Employment insurance is a useful and necessary program in regions where the economy is based on seasonal work. Despite the efforts already made by stakeholders to diversify the economy, the fact remains that tourism, fishing, forestry and agriculture are the main industries in our regions, and it is thanks to the skills of the men and women who work in these industries that they are able to prosper.

Despite the need to maintain the transitional measures and the recommendations to that effect, the Conservative government terminated urgent and essential financial assistance measures in November 2011. It is time for the Conservative government to stop being so stubborn for no reason and assume its responsibilities by stimulating the regional economy rather than letting it go down in flames.

People from eastern Quebec are getting organized, non-partisan round tables have been set up, a coalition has been formed and a meeting with the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development was recently requested. I hope that the minister will take this opportunity to gain a better understanding of the reality of our communities.

I would like to close by reiterating our request to this government:

That the House call on the government to reverse devastating changes it has made to Employment Insurance which restrict access and benefits, depress wages, push vulnerable Canadians into poverty and download costs to the provinces; and reinstate the Extra Five Weeks pilot project to avoid the impending "black hole" of financial insecurity facing workers in seasonal industries and the regional economies they support.

• (1645)

**Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his speech. He is another MP from a Quebec region that will be hit hard by these changes who is speaking up for his constituents. It is wonderful to see that.

During question period, the government told us a little about what it believes is the solution. The Minister of Finance boasted that more Walmart stores will open their doors in Canada. I guess the Conservatives want people to work there.

We would like our constituents to continue to have jobs that are not only good for them, but also good for our local economies.

I would like my colleague to talk about the fact that the minister seems to be completely ignoring what is happening on the ground. The government keeps saying that we are trying to scare people. In fact, somewhat the opposite holds true. We are bringing these demands to the House because they are the demands of the people we represent.

*Business of Supply*

Protests are being held in Quebec, New Brunswick and elsewhere. We participate in these protests, but they are initiated by the people. We are simply speaking on their behalf in the House of Commons.

I would like my colleague to talk about the fact that the minister did not consult these people.

When members of the government rise, they do not really understand why these people are opposed to these changes.

I would also like him to speak more about the minister's lack of consultation and her ignorance of the reality, especially in Quebec.

**Mr. Jonathan Tremblay:** Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question.

I find this situation frustrating for two reasons. First of all, they did not mention employment insurance reform at all during the election. Second, they never used Parliament's democratic institutions to bring people here and consult those who are directly affected by these measures, whether they represent the business sector or the community at large.

The Conservatives had no intention whatsoever of bringing in representatives from the affected industries in my riding and in our various regions. Some even had the door slammed in their faces.

What is the point of making changes and proclaiming that it is for the people when the people were not even consulted?

Everyone in the House agrees that the regions need more diverse economies. But in the meantime, we need measures such as employment insurance that allow people to stay in their communities, to have financial security, to make plans for the future and to watch industries develop in their communities. Otherwise, they will simply pack up and leave. It is a vicious cycle. The region's economy will be decimated.

•(1650)

[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 find it mildly interesting listening to the opposition. This government has created 920,000 net new jobs since the downturn of the recession. I want to commend Walmart and all those other great industry leaders for creating new jobs. Unlike the NDP, this government supports the creation of new jobs.

Let us talk more about that. If members want to talk about consultations, that is great. Many of my government colleagues and I have spent time doing pre-budget consultations across the entire country. In fact, I was involved in 15 in January alone.

Let us stop fearmongering. If the NDP members really want to support job creation, why did they not support the EI hiring tax credit for small businesses? Why do they not support the youth employment strategy? Why do they not support the creation of jobs? My question to the member opposite is about our changes to EI, the job alerts program and the workingincanada.gc.ca Internet opportunity. Has he talked to any of his constituents about—

**The Speaker:** The hon. member for Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord.

[Translation]

**Mr. Jonathan Tremblay:** Mr. Speaker, there is no need to worry: people in my riding know exactly what recourse they have. And they know it is limited.

The House really does not seem to understand, and I find that frustrating. Fifteen meetings in January? I bet they were pointless.

Those directly involved—people who work for movements such as Action Chômage, for example—wanted to meet with ministers. But the meetings never happened and these people were ignored. It took weeks for them to get a response and, in the end, they were only able to speak with a public servant. Who knows where he was located; he could barely speak French. No, there have not been meaningful consultations.

**Ms. Charmaine Borg (Terrebonne—Blainville, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his excellent speech.

It is extremely important for this government to hear first-hand accounts of what is happening in his region.

In my region, there are also people who work for community organizations and who contribute a great deal to their community. Unfortunately, organizations do not have enough funding to remain open in the summer. The employees therefore lose their jobs and have to go on EI. They are considered seasonal workers. They are very worried about their jobs. They feel like they are being penalized. They are constantly giving back to their community, but this government never gives them anything in return.

I wonder if my colleague could comment on that.

**Mr. Jonathan Tremblay:** Mr. Speaker, my colleague is quite right when she says that, unfortunately, certain jobs are not year-round. We cannot build 10 Walmart stores and five McDonald's restaurants in a small town. There can only be so many McJobs. There are limits.

Indeed, some people do not have work year-round. We can bring in an industry in the secondary processing of lumber or minerals, but that will not create 10,000 jobs overnight. It requires a concerted effort and long-term vision. So we need employment insurance until that can be achieved.

[English]

**Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to address something my hon. colleague from Dartmouth—Cole Harbour said, which was something I believe was mistaken, about the people of Atlantic Canada and the government. I would like to correct that.

This government values our great Canadians from Atlantic Canada. I served in the Canadian armed forces. I served with many great people from that region. To a man and women, they were hard-working, brave, honest and patriotic. There are no better Canadians. I stand for these great people of Atlantic Canada.

I would also like to point out that we have created 920,000 new jobs since the recession, and most of those are full-time.



*Business of Supply*

I am pleased to have this opportunity to respond to this motion from my hon. colleague from Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles. A lot has been said about our government's employment insurance changes, and it is hard to see much that is actually accurate in the intentionally misleading and exaggerated claims of the opposition parties. My response will therefore focus on setting the record straight and on drawing attention to the difference between the myths and the facts with respect to the changes our government has made to EI.

The hon. member alleges that EI changes have been harmful rather than necessary and have either put EI out of reach of hard-working Canadians or have created undue financial hardship for many. These are myths that are simply not based on evidence. Yet these stories continue to spread, without a shred of fact. I can see why the opposition is attempting to use the politics of fear in a desperate attempt to win public support. I would say that it is misguided. Clearly, the opposition no longer holds itself to the high standards it professed in the last election.

I would like to bust a few of the myths. Job creation, economic growth and long-term prosperity for all Canadians are our government's top priorities. We need everybody's skills and talents at work in our nation. There are skills and labour shortages across the country, from most rural parts of our great nation to the downtown urban cores. Does the opposition motion attempt to address this most pressing of economic challenges? Does this motion increase Canada's chances of growth and long-term prosperity? The answer is decidedly no. Instead, it feeds into five big myths about EI, and I am going to address each one of those right now.

Myth number one is that EI changes mean that people are going to lose their benefits. This is categorically false. No one who makes a reasonable effort to look for and accept a suitable job will be cut off of EI. The purpose of EI has always been, and will continue to be, to provide temporary income support while someone is looking for another job.

Regarding the requirement for claimants of EI regular and fishing benefits to look for work while collecting benefits, this is not new. What is new, however, is that the Government of Canada has put forward a series of measures to help unemployed Canadians transition back into the labour force more quickly. Whether claimants live in a big city or a small community, they now have access to information on locally available jobs on, as was pointed out by the hon. parliamentary secretary earlier, [www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca). Some members were not familiar with that website. Hopefully they are now and will be able to access that and provide that information to their constituents. I hope they do.

We have also clarified what a claimant's responsibilities are while collecting EI. This was done through the new regulations that came into effect in early January. These definitions explain what constitutes suitable work and a reasonable job search. The fact is that EI will always be there for people who need it. All that is expected is what all hard-working Canadians expect of themselves, and that is to do their best to find jobs.

Myth number two is that EI changes mean that seasonal industries risk losing their trained workforces. That is false. If a seasonal business is a good employer, one that pays workers a fair wage, there

is no reason the employees would not return to their jobs when the season resumes.

Let us also be clear that EI is not meant as an income supplement for those who choose not to look for work during the off-season, especially when work is available in their local area. Seasonal workers, like any other type of worker, are required to look for work when receiving EI. However, there is nothing in these changes that prevents people from returning to a previous employer should they choose to do so once a new season starts. The intent of the updated regulations is to help claimants transition back into the workforce by clearly stating how to look for suitable employment and when to broaden the search.

• (1655)

We are making sure that Canadians are always better off working than not. That is why these regulations ensure that suitable employment consists of opportunities that would result in a claimant being better off financially by working than by receiving only EI benefits.

What about the status of the extended EI benefit pilot project and its effect on seasonal work?

In their motion, NDP members are specifically calling for a renewal today of the extra five weeks pilot project. However, this pilot project was a temporary measure. It was aimed at providing five weeks of extra EI benefits to Canadians who were hardest hit during the worst years of the recession. The program was never meant to be permanent. It was introduced nationally by our government in 2008 and then subsequently renewed in 2010 as part of our economic action plan, which of course has helped raise 920,000 new jobs since the recession. Canada is in a period of economic recovery, and temporary supports like the extra five weeks pilot project were allowed to end because of the improvements we have seen in our economy.

Now to myth number three: Do EI changes mean having to accept work even when there is more than an hour commute or a drive up to 100 kilometres? This is a question that is often asked. However, this is false.

The common-sense changes we made are helping more Canadians to find a job as quickly as possible. The fact is that there are skills and labour shortages in many parts of the country, including areas of high unemployment. Our efforts are meant to help people find available jobs in their geographic areas and areas of expertise. Again, the [www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca) website is going to go a long way in assisting them to do that.

Commuting time is only one element that makes a job suitable. Other factors to take into account are personal circumstances, working conditions, the type of work, as well as the wages and hours of work. Of course, common sense will always prevail, and no one will be forced to take a job that is going to result in higher living costs and thus be financially worse off than they would be on EI.

*Business of Supply*

While one hour is generally accepted as an appropriate commuting time, commuting time can be longer only in two very specific circumstances: if one has a pattern of travelling more than one hour in the past, which is quite possible and some may be used to that sort of thing; or if one lives in a community where it is not uncommon to travel such distances, such as large metropolitan areas. Let me be clear that the requirement regarding the commute refers to the time it takes to go from a claimant's home to the place of work and not to drive 100 kilometres. I cannot stress enough that personal circumstances will always be taken into consideration. There is a lot of flexibility and common sense built into this plan.

Myth number four: Do EI changes mean someone will be made worse off by accepting a low-paying job? Again, this is false, and here are the facts.

We are helping EI claimants get back into the job market and not penalizing them. Furthermore, the changes ensure that claimants accepting suitable employment will be better off working than receiving only EI. As I explained in my remarks, our changes are guided by common sense. There is a lot of flexibility. We will, of course, take into account a claimant's personal circumstances to determine whether a particular job is suitable or not.

If claimants live where there are few jobs available, there are still activities they can do to look for work. Simply saying that there is no work, but not looking for work, is not acceptable. At a minimum, those living in regions with limited employment opportunities can talk with former co-workers, friends and other community resources about job openings. That networking option is something people generally do as a standard operating procedure when looking for a job. They can look in newspapers or online for potential jobs. They can also use the enhanced job alerts up to twice daily for jobs available in the area for up-to-date information. Again, the website is [www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca).

Should people be compelled to accept a job that would leave them worse off financially than being on EI? Well, no, that is not going to happen. EI is there to help support people while they are looking for a new job.

Myth number five: Do EI changes mean that there are new obligations for claimants? Once again, this is false.

Much has been made of claimants being obligated to search for suitable work. Let us look at the facts. These claimants have always been required to conduct a reasonable job search and accept any offer of suitable employment. That is not new.

● (1700)

The changes are about making those responsibilities clear for claimants. The regulations have been updated, and now there is a clear understanding of what constitutes suitable employment and a reasonable job search.

Let us set the record straight. The updated rules defining what constitutes suitable employment are based on the following. They are based on commuting time, working conditions, the type of work, compensation, hours of work and the claimant's personal situation. The type of work and compensation that a claimant will have to seek will vary based on his or her contribution to and use of the EI program and time spent on the claim.

In the face of groundless fearmongering, as witnessed in the motion, I have laid out the facts on the changes our government has made to EI. What we are doing with these changes is helping move Canada in the right direction, to continue on a path of success and prosperity for all. That is the absolute goal, success and prosperity for all. Nine hundred and twenty thousand new jobs, mostly full-time, have been created because our government remains focused on jobs and the economy, and Canadians are benefiting from that focus.

It is a fact that job creation and economic growth for every single Canadian looking for a job continues to be the number one priority of the government, and we are proud of the 920,000 new jobs. This is a G7-leading job growth statistic and is because of the strong economic leadership of our Prime Minister and our Minister of Finance, who I believe is now the longest serving finance minister in the G7 and in fact the best.

Our economic action plan is working and has shown tremendous results. Members do not have to listen to me; they can look at the world bodies, expert organizations like the IMF and others around the world who laud Canada for its approach and successes. Other countries are now modelling themselves on Canada because of our success in growing our economy and jobs and making sure that success and prosperity are equally distributed to all Canadians. We continue on that mission because it is important to do that. It is something that we as a government will remain focused on for all Canadians.

We have provided job seekers with better tools to help them with that task and it now means that Canadians are better connected than ever to the jobs that are available in their local areas, matching their skills. Unfortunately, the NDP continues to vote against measures that are helping Canadians by creating more jobs and economic growth.

The Prime Minister and the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development have been very clear. If Canadians are unable to find work, employment insurance will be there for them, just as it always has been. We have been clear that personal circumstances will be considered when it comes to determining what a reasonable job offer is.

Those are the facts. I urge all members to vote against this ill-informed motion and vote against the fearmongering.

*Business of Supply*

I have heard today that it is better to remain on EI than to work at Tim Hortons, for example. I think that is rather insulting to that particular company because Tim Hortons is a venerable organization to Canadians. Many of us who travel abroad look forward to that Tim Hortons coffee when we come home. I know I do. Tim Hortons has the Timbits hockey program. It is great for the Canadian Forces deployed abroad. It is a tremendous organization. It is a well-suited organization for a lot of people.

Tim Hortons provides opportunities in many areas. For example, what can one learn at Tim Hortons? One can learn about restaurant supply systems, production, management development, retail and growth within the company. It is a very vibrant company.

As we heard today, the Minister of Finance said The Source stores are expanding in Canada and providing jobs. Retail is a very vibrant sector in our country. Walmart stores are coming. I heard someone snicker about the Walmart stores earlier, which is just unacceptable because that also is a tremendous organization that is growing and providing jobs. It has always provided jobs to seniors as well. That is tremendously laudable for the company to do that.

• (1705)

As I mentioned, McDonald's has a world-renowned management development system. People who started on the line flipping burgers have risen in the ranks of that company to manage local stores and groups of stores within that organization. It has been a tremendous boost for people just starting their careers, who may have been unskilled when they started but developed those skills as they worked their way up through that company.

The same is true of other chains, restaurants, retail jobs and all of the jobs that some in the opposition benches here deem to be "beneath them". That is unfortunate because that speaks to the attitude of the NDP and the Liberals. It smacks of a do as I say, not as I do kind of attitude. That is not good enough for this government. This kind of misinformation and fearmongering does no service to Canadians.

In my own personal experience, I have bussed tables, waited on tables and been a short-order cook. I have built cars on the factory line. I have been a Bell telephone technician. I worked my way up. I started in the army and worked my way up from a private. I have driven a truck and delivered fruits and vegetables as well.

Nothing is beneath anybody who wants to work. That is called the dignity of work, the pride of work. That is what I always got out of it. I always felt proud that I worked my own way. I did not care how dirty my hands got. When I came home at the end of the day, at the end of my shift, I always felt good about myself. I felt pride in the fact that I earned my own dollar and that I contributed to the economy in my country by working. It does not matter what the job is. What matters is the pride and work ethic that individuals have, to seek that kind of dignity while they are working. It is important to keep that in mind.

The vast majority of Canadians think this way too. Members on the opposition benches are doing a lot of characterization of people being looked down on or taking a job that is beneath them. No job is beneath anybody in this country. Most Canadians get up every day and do the best job they can, be the best Canadian they can be. If

they are looking for work, they are looking for work earnestly. The vast majority of people do a good job and contribute to this country. They aspire to that, and this government is going to help them do that.

One of the ways we are going to do that is with our job search website, which again is [www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca). I am repeating that over and over because I am hoping it sinks in. I am hopeful that members on the opposition benches will catch up with those of us on the governing side and provide this information to their constituents. It is hugely important that they assist them in doing that.

In my riding, I help my constituents do that. I have been helping some of those people with high dropout rates. I have been steering some of those young adults to find jobs and working with the community college and other trade schools to find opportunities for them. We have been doing some job counselling and helping to develop opportunities for people.

It is hugely important for people to be able to find their way in life, to find those opportunities, to find a path and an interest in something about which they can be passionate. It is important for people to find a job and move on and develop themselves in life. That is something I definitely do in Etobicoke Centre. Unfortunately, sometimes members on the opposition benches consider looking for those kinds of opportunities a colossal waste of time. We on this side of the House do not do that. We believe that a Canadian who wants to find a job, a Canadian who wants to work, is a proud Canadian, a Canadian with a lot of dignity. We are going to push and work for that.

I certainly hope that members on that side of the House will start working with their own constituents that way and take a hands-on approach to helping them find a job rather than spreading rhetoric, fear, misunderstanding and misinformation in the House, which is something we do not want to do.

• (1710)

The government will never do what the Liberals did, and that is take billions, to the tune of \$57 billion, out of the EI program. That is absolutely staggering and absolutely unacceptable.

I would just remind all hon. members to steer all their constituents who are looking for work to [www.workingincanada.gc.ca](http://www.workingincanada.gc.ca).

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton):** I appreciate that all hon. members are eager for questions and comments. However, it being 5:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

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

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

**Some hon. members:** No.

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

**Some hon. members:** Yea.

*Business of Supply*

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

**Some hon. members:** Nay.

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

*And five or more members having risen:*

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, the NDP would like the division to be deferred until tomorrow, Wednesday, February 6, 2013, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

[*English*]

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton):** Accordingly the recorded division stands deferred until tomorrow at the end of government orders.

**Hon. Gordon O'Connor:** Mr. Speaker, could we see the clock at 5:30 p.m.?

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

**Some hon. members:** Agreed.

OPPOSITION MOTION—ABORIGINAL CANADIANS

The House resumed from January 31 consideration of the motion.

**Mr. Bruce Stanton (Assistant Deputy Chair of Committees of the Whole, CPC):** It being 5:30 p.m., pursuant to an order made on Thursday, January 31, the House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the motion of the hon. member for Nanaimo—Cowichan relating to the business of supply.

Call in the members.

• (1755)

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

(*Division No. 611*)

YEAS

Members

Adams	Adler
Albas	Albrecht
Alexander	Allen (Welland)
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)	Allison
Ambler	Ambrose
Anders	Anderson
Andrews	Angus
Armstrong	Ashfield
Ashton	Aspin
Atamanenko	Aubin
Ayala	Baird
Bateman	Bélangier
Bellavance	Bennett
Benoit	Benskin
Bergen	Bernier
Bevington	Bezan
Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Blaney	Block
Boivin	Borg
Boughen	Boulerice
Boutin-Sweet	Brahmi
Braid	Brousseau
Brown (Leeds—Grenville)	Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)
Brown (Barrie)	Bruinooge

Butt	Byrne
Calandra	Calkins
Cannan	Carmichael
Caron	Carrie
Casey	Cash
Charlton	Chicoine
Chisholm	Chisu
Chong	Choquette
Chow	Christopherson
Clarke	Clement
Coderre	Côté
Cotler	Crockatt
Crowder	Cullen
Cuzner	Daniel
Davidson	Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Day	Dechert
Del Mastro	Devolin
Dewar	Dion
Dionne Labelle	Donnelly
Doré Lefebvre	Dreeshen
Dubé	Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)	Dusseau
Dykstra	Easter
Eyking	Findlay (Delta—Richmond East)
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Fletcher
Foote	Fortin
Freeman	Fry
Galipeau	Gallant
Garrison	Genest
Genest-Jourdain	Giguère
Gill	Glover
Godin	Goguen
Goodale	Goodyear
Gosal	Gourde
Gravelle	Grewal
Groguhé	Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Harris (St. John's East)	Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn	Hayes
Hiebert	Hillyer
Hoback	Holder
Hsu	Hughes
Hyer	Jacob
Jean	Julian
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kellway	Kenney (Calgary Southeast)
Komarnicki	Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)
Lake	Lamoureux
Lapointe	Larose
Lauzon	Laverdière
Lebel	LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)	Leef
Leitch	Lemieux
Leslie	Leung
Liu	Lizon
Lobb	Lukiwski
Lunney	MacAulay
MacKay (Central Nova)	MacKenzie
Mai	Marston
Martin	Masse
Mathysen	May
Mayes	McColeman
McGuinty	McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
McLeod	Menegakis
Menzies	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)
Mourani	Mulcair
Murray	Nantel
Nash	Nicholls
Nicholson	Norlock
Nunez-Melo	O'Connor
O'Neill Gordon	Opitz
O'Toole	Pacetti
Papillon	Patry
Payne	Pélet
Penashue	Perreault
Pilon	Plamondon
Poilievre	Preston
Quach	Rae
Rafferty	Raitt
Rajotte	Rankin

Rathgeber	Ravignat
Raynault	Regan
Reid	Rempel
Richards	Rickford
Rousseau	Saganash
Sandhu	Saxton
Scarpaleggia	Schellenberger
Scott	Seeback
Sellah	Sgro
Shea	Shipley
Shory	Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind- sor)
Sitsabaiesan	Smith
Sopuck	Sorenson
Stanton	St-Denis
Stewart	Stoffer
Storseth	Strahl
Sullivan	Sweet
Thibeault	Tilson
Toet	Toone
Tremblay	Trost
Trottier	Truppe
Turnel	Tweed
Uppal	Valcourt
Valeriotte	Van Kesteren
Van Loan	Vellacott
Wallace	Warawa
Warkentin	Watson
Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)	
Weston (Saint John)	
Wilks	Williamson
Woodworth	Yelich
Young (Oakville)	Young (Vancouver South)— 276

NAYS

Nil

PAIRED

Nil

**The Speaker:** I declare the motion carried.

It being 5:56 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business, as listed on today's order paper.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

• (1800)

[*Translation*]

### HOMES NOT CONNECTED TO A SANITATION SYSTEM

**Ms. Mylène Freeman (Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel, NDP)** moved:

That, in the opinion of the House, the government should study the possibility of establishing, in co-operation with the provinces and territories, one or more financial support programs, inspired by the one proposed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, that would bring up to standard the septic systems of homes not connected to a sanitation system, in an effort to ensure urban/rural balance, lake protection, water quality and public health.

She said: Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present today my Motion No. 400, which seeks to protect the water and public health of our rural communities. The motion calls on the government to study the possibility of helping to bring up to standard the septic systems of homes not connected to a sanitation system, in an effort to ensure urban/rural balance and the protection of our lakes, rivers, water quality and public health.

As an MP who lives in a rural area, I had to bring this issue before the House in order to address the urban/rural imbalance in federal

### *Private Members' Business*

priorities and because this is important for the environment and public health.

I am using my motion to highlight this important issue for Canadians in rural ridings and I hope that it will encourage the House to take meaningful action in the service of our fellow citizens.

Since I was elected, I have made it my duty to consult with, and listen to, residents in my riding with a view to taking meaningful action on their behalf. This motion stems from concern in my riding, but also concern on the part of all Canadians who live in rural communities, which is approximately a quarter of all Canadians.

The first person to raise the issue being debated in this motion was Scott Pearce, the mayor of the Township of Gore, which is in my riding. The mayor cares about the well-being of the residents of his municipality and he was the Conservative candidate in Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel in 2008. I am proud to have him as an ally and to be working alongside him on behalf of the people of our region.

In 2006, he began fighting for an assistance program for property owners with septic tanks who have to replace or upgrade their tanks. He noted that a number of residents in his municipality were not able to make their septic tanks compliant due to the huge cost involved.

[*English*]

For those who may not be familiar with the issue, rural homes are not connected to municipal waste water treatment plants and on-site treatment and disposal of waste water are relied on.

While researching this project, I had the opportunity to visit the Ontario Rural Wastewater Centre of the University of Guelph's Alfred campus to meet the staff members and discuss the issue. They told me that in Ontario, for example, there are approximately 1.2 million on-site systems and this number is increasing at a rate of 25,000 systems each year. The costs are highly variable depending on a number of factors like proximity to the house, soil type and house size, but can be anywhere from \$5,000 to \$20,000 each time for the homeowner.

[*Translation*]

Replacing the tanks amounts to a huge financial burden for rural residents, especially those with a below-average or fixed income, such as retirees.

At the same time, the federal and provincial governments are setting aside up to 85% of funds to ensure that municipalities can build or modernize their infrastructure. Cities can get federal grants that easily amount to the cost of one tank per residence. Rural residents feel abandoned by the federal government on this issue.

With that in mind, Mr. Pearce sought the support of the RCM of Argenteuil. The region is greatly affected by this problem, and the RCM has supported his work. With local allies such as Julien Béliveau, Agnès Grondin, environmental advisor to the RCM of Argenteuil, and Marc Carrière, the executive director of the RCM of Argenteuil, he has continued to put—

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton):** Order, please. There is too much noise in the chamber. I would ask the members to continue their conversations outside the chamber.

The hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel.

*Private Members' Business*

**Ms. Mylène Freeman:** Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank Julien Béliveau, Agnès Grondin, the environmental advisor for the RCM of Argenteuil, and Marc Carrière, the executive director of the RCM of Argenteuil, who continued to raise this important issue for the environment, for the economy and for true equality between rural and urban communities.

I would also like to thank all the RCMs, all the municipalities and all the constituents in my riding who have also given me an enormous amount of support on this initiative.

Mr. Pearce also received the support of the Fédération québécoise des municipalités and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the FCM.

• (1805)

[English]

The FCM represents virtually all Canadian municipalities. The organization, speaking on behalf of Canadian municipal issues from across the country, adopted a resolution asking the federal government to treat rural communities fairly by investing a fair share into the protection of water and health of the rural communities. Despite all the work that Scott did on the issue, with the support of his MRC and the FCM, the Conservative government's response was a resounding rejection, showing a clear lack of attention and sensitivity to the real concerns of rural communities.

[Translation]

The fact that this is an important issue in my riding should not prevent anyone from seeing that it is also an important issue across the country.

After attending the FCM conference in Saskatoon last year, I obtained the support of the FCM for the motion that I am presenting today. According to the FCM:

The municipal sector and the federal government are jointly responsible for protecting public health and the environment. We are convinced that the government can include septic systems in its comprehensive approach to water and deal with the issue of waste water for all Canadians.

Canada's rural municipalities want to work with the federal government using a comprehensive approach with clear commitments.

[English]

There are many rural municipalities across the country, literally from coast to coast, that are calling for the federal government to take a leadership role on this issue. From Gambo in Newfoundland and Labrador to the city of Powell River in British Columbia and everywhere in between, from the village of Delia, Alberta, the town of Lumsden in Saskatchewan to Saint-Roch-de-l'Achigan in Quebec to Grand-Sault in New Brunswick, municipalities have responded to this proposal with overwhelming support.

The Association of Summer Villages of Alberta, for example, which represents 51 municipalities directly affected by the motion, wrote to me describing its situation, saying:

—deficient waste water management is a major pollutant. We recognize the need to have proper waste water systems but do not have the funds/ resources to establish these systems....up to acceptable standards so as to protect the public resources: lake protection, water quality and public health.

Many other municipalities across Canada wrote to me to express their support for the motion, for example, the village of Fruitvale in British Columbia. It said:

—the rural area surrounding Fruitvale has only septic field sewage systems and in recent years a number of them have failed which has caused significant financial problems for some rural homeowners.

The town of Conception Bay in Newfoundland said:

A financial program to assist those not yet connected would be beneficial and appreciated by those who would avail of possible funding.

I could go on and on, but what is important to note is that this is such an important issue for all rural municipalities across the country.

[Translation]

In response to my proposal, the government might say that it has already invested in wastewater treatment infrastructure. However, it has only done so for cities and village centres, leaving rural Canadians to their own devices. Meanwhile, federal taxes paid by rural Canadians are being invested only in the cities. Rural Canadian citizens do not want preferential treatment; all they want is fair treatment.

The government might say that there is a Canada Mortgage and Housing (CMHC) program that addresses the problem. Unfortunately, the program does nothing of the kind. According to Gore Township:

...the CMHC and Société d'habitation du Québec programs... do not address the socioeconomic issue being described and the funds allocated for the region... are laughable compared to potential demand;

For the RCM of Argenteuil, a total of \$90,000 has been made available for a population of 30,000. That amounts to five or six septic tanks for every 30,000 people. It is completely ridiculous. The situation is not unique to Quebec either; information from the municipality of Delia, Alberta, for example, corroborates this. According to the municipality:

• (1810)

[English]

—grants from the Province of Alberta cannot be used to assist private property owners to upgrade their private sewer systems...

[Translation]

In a discussion of the matter with their member of Parliament, he admitted that it was not enough to deal with the problem.

Nevertheless, the problem is more than anything else an environmental issue. My motion was accordingly supported by the Regroupement des organismes de bassins versants du Québec, a non-profit organization of various drainage basin organizations working to mobilize, coordinate and generate action by citizens and water stakeholders.

The importance of water in Canada is all too often forgotten. With more than two million lakes and the world's largest reserves of soft water, we often take our water for granted. However, even though it is a resource that is essential to life, the environment and our economy, it is not protected from contamination.

Outdated septic tanks ought not to be taken lightly. An analysis prepared by the United Nations Environment Programme states that:

Septic tank systems, the largest source of waste discharged to the land, contain many organic contaminants and are suspected to be one of the key sources of rural well contamination.

According to Environment Canada, waste water causes the loss of oxygen dissolved in lakes and is therefore responsible for the death of fish and other aquatic biota. Phosphorus and nitrogen can also cause eutrophication or the overfertilization of receiving waters that can become toxic for aquatic organisms, promote the excessive growth of plants and thus reduce the amount of available oxygen, harm and alter the habitat and lead to the decline of some species.

The problem is not new. As pointed out by the Laurentides' CRE, "waste water ... has been considered a source of pollution and eutrophication of aquatic environment for over 30 years." Therefore, non-compliant or poorly maintained septic systems can cause "a proliferation of algae, aquatic plants and sometimes cyanobacteria".

So, it is clear that obsolete and defective septic tanks have a major impact on our environment, and that inaction would have disastrous consequences.

[English]

We only have to look at the situation of Lake Simcoe, for example. The government's plan to revitalize and clean it is immense. Thirty million dollars have been set aside to fight against the phosphorous destroying the ecology of this important southern Ontario lake.

Environment Canada's press release for this plan describes that:

As part of this investment, the Septic System Funding Program will receive \$760,000, for the third phase of a multi-year initiative. Building on the success of Phases 1 and 2, this program will continue to administer grant funds in order to encourage landowners within 300 metres of Lake Simcoe to upgrade and/or repair their current septic systems.

Another example is Lake Winnipeg. Again the government has had to intervene with a program of expensive and extensive phosphorous pollution cleanup that could have been avoided.

While, I am very glad the government is acting to clean up Lake Simcoe and Lake Winnipeg, a substantial amount of money could have been saved if we had acted before it got to the point of no return.

[Translation]

Canadian lakes and rivers are important natural resources and regional economic engines. All Canadians want to preserve and protect their environment and their health.

In conclusion, this motion would have a positive impact on the environment, because defective septic tanks are a major source of pollution for our lakes and rivers. It would also have a positive impact on our economy, because a measure like the one proposed in our motion is good for the financial health of those Canadians who are affected. Finally, it would have a positive impact on rural-urban equity.

I hope all members from all parties in this House realize that the motion is an invitation to discuss this issue and find solutions for Canadians in rural settings.

*Private Members' Business*

● (1815)

[English]

**Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I have just one question for my hon. colleague. Why did she decide to make this a private member's motion rather than a private member's bill, which if passed would have far more power and far wider implementation?

**Ms. Mylène Freeman:** Mr. Speaker, that was a very simple question, and I will provide my colleague with a very simple answer.

The thing I would like us to do is discuss the motion. I do not want the government to feel that its hands would be tied by legislation. I want us to take concrete action together as a House. I hope the member will see this as an opportunity for the House to do something for rural Canadians, for real. I hope we can all work together so that this becomes a reality.

[Translation]

**Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel.

As we saw in the motion this morning, we must not have second-class citizens. People must be able to fully enjoy rural life. That also means that we need measures related to septic tanks.

However, since this is a federal-provincial program involving the municipalities, I would like to know whether she has already contacted the Government of Quebec to see if she could find an attentive ear.

**Ms. Mylène Freeman:** Mr. Speaker, with the FQM's support for the motion and the proposed program, we would clearly need to work with the province to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

We all know that the municipalities fall under provincial jurisdiction whereas waste water falls under federal jurisdiction. We therefore have to work with all the stakeholders involved. That is why I included this in the motion.

I hope that all the stakeholders who are interested in implementing a program will work together in good faith to produce tangible results for Canadians.

**Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate the hon. member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel. She is truly a strong voice in the House.

She just spoke not only on behalf of her riding, which she represents so well, but also on behalf of Canadians living in rural areas across the country.

There have been signs that the Conservatives may support this motion, at least I hope they will.

My question for the hon. member is quite simple: does she think this is really a matter of quality of life for rural areas of the country and that they should finally be put on equal footing with the country's urban areas?

**Ms. Mylène Freeman:** Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

*Private Members' Business*

According to the FCM, approximately one-quarter of Canadians have septic tanks. It is true that this affects many Canadians right across the country.

A lot of people are leaving the regions. And the septic tanks is one of the reasons they give for not wanting to buy a house in the regions. It should not be. Everyone pays the same taxes. Everyone should receive fair treatment and receive the same investments as everyone else.

[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 recognize that there is a good intention behind the motion. I want to ask the member about her understanding of provincial jurisdiction. Why has she decided to bring the motion forward to the House, when this is clearly an issue under provincial and/or territorial jurisdiction.

• (1820)

**Ms. Mylène Freeman:** Mr. Speaker, this is really a shared priority. Jurisdiction is shared with the federal, municipal and provincial governments. That is why we need to work with all levels of government if we are going to be setting up a program.

If something is administered by a municipality it does not mean that the federal government can take leadership on the issue. Again, I made this a motion so that the House and the government could make concrete moves toward helping rural Canadians.

**Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I would like to congratulate my colleague opposite on putting forward, I believe, her first motion to the House of Commons. I have done so myself. It is not an easy thing to do, and sometimes it can cause a lot of work in one's own office. I appreciate that, and I want to make sure that my comments reflect that tone of appreciation.

I would, however, like to comment on some of the comments by the hon. colleague opposite in her speech with regard to the summer villages in Alberta, for example, which I am very well aware of. In fact, I actually just got off the phone with one of my municipalities. We were talking about this issue.

When a member puts forward a motion in the House of Commons and calls up different municipalities and says, "I'm going to do something that's going to get you more money for vital infrastructure in your riding", that raises their expectations, which I think is unfortunate. There are a couple of things to look at. First, we know that this is a provincial jurisdiction. We know that this is under municipal jurisdiction. Under the wastewater systems effluent regulations under the Fisheries Act, we know that septic systems for individuals fall under provincial and municipal jurisdiction.

The other problem is the fact that the member herself acknowledges that she wanted to put forward a motion, knowing that it would not bind the government's hands. I find it somewhat troubling when the member opposite decides not to take the concrete steps of actual legislation. She would rather talk about it in the form of a motion, because she knows that it would require a royal recommendation and the government would not even have a chance to vote on it. Instead, it was put forward in this manner, which I find

to be somewhat troubling. It raises the expectations of a municipality such as Bonnyville, which I just spoke to. They are not necessarily cognizant of all these facts.

The other aspect, as members well know, is that our government has invested a lot of money in many of the lakes and rivers for environmental protection. I know that Lake Simcoe has. I know that Georgian Bay has been announced. I know that Lake Winnipeg has received money for this. These are great things that should be celebrated. It should not be used as a fearmongering tactic to say that the environment is being penalized.

I would like to continue by thanking the member for Simcoe—Grey for the excellent work she has done in trying to advocate and for ensuring that everybody understands what the motion actually represents.

While I certainly appreciate the hon. member's good intentions, I must inform the House that the government will not be supporting the motion. The regulation of household septic systems off reserve is, as I said, the responsibility of provinces and territories. This simply is not an area of federal jurisdiction.

We continue, however, to take action, in areas of federal responsibility, to protect Canada's environment and the health of our citizens. Last July, for example, our government announced the new wastewater systems effluent regulations, which were established under the authority of the Fisheries Act, after consulting with the provinces, territories, aboriginal communities and other stakeholders. These regulations are the federal government's principal instrument for implementing the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment's Canada-wide strategy for the management of municipal wastewater effluent. While the regulations do not apply to household septic systems, they do tackle the largest source of water pollution in Canada.

Our government is also making historic investments in public infrastructure. Public wastewater infrastructure has been one of the key categories of investment under the federal infrastructure program. Since 2007, approximately \$1.8 billion has been committed to over 1,200 wastewater projects across the country under the building Canada fund and a number of economic action plan infrastructure programs. Also, under Canada's economic action plan, our government provided \$2 billion in low-interest loans to municipalities for housing-related infrastructure projects, including sewage and water systems.

Since 2005, over \$600 million has been allocated under the gas tax fund toward wastewater infrastructure across Canada.



*Private Members' Business*

•(1825)

The Government of Canada will continue to support public wastewater infrastructure through programs such as the gas tax fund, which is now permanent at \$2 billion per year. Municipalities can choose to spend 100% of this funding to upgrade their wastewater infrastructure. In ridings such as mine, in northeast Alberta, that have tremendous growth pressures and enormous responsibilities for more infrastructure, I know that many, but not all, of my municipalities are putting significant amounts of their gas tax money into exactly these kinds of projects. That is exactly the way they would like us to continue to fund them.

It is also worth noting that our government provided \$550 million to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to establish the green municipal fund. The fund supports partnerships and the leveraging of public and private sector funding to achieve higher standards of air, water and soil quality as well as climate protection.

While the federal government does not have jurisdiction over private household septic systems, Canadians may be able to access federal support in a couple of ways. The first is through mortgage loan insurance, which can be purchased from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, with the full backing of the Government of Canada. The current parameters for government-backed mortgage loan insurance allow homeowners to refinance their mortgages up to 80% of the value of their homes. Qualified homeowners can apply for CMHC-insured loans for any purpose, including for upgrading septic systems.

Homeowners may also have access to federal funding under the investment in affordable housing framework 2011-2014. Under this framework, CMHC is providing more than \$238 million per year to provinces and territories to reduce the number of Canadians in need of housing by improving access to affordable housing that is sound, suitable and sustainable.

Most jurisdictions, provinces and territories match the federal investment and are responsible for program design, delivery and administration. They have the flexibility to invest in a range of solutions, which could include assistance for the repair of septic systems, if they so choose.

In the Yukon and Prince Edward Island, CMHC delivers renovation programs off reserve. Under these programs, forgivable loans are available to qualifying low-income households to address major deficiencies in dwelling structures or systems, including plumbing.

On reserve, first nations chiefs and councils are responsible for planning and developing their capital facilities to provide for the basic infrastructure needs of the community. They are also responsible for the day-to-day operation of water and wastewater systems on reserve.

Our government is making significant investments to support first nations communities in managing their water and wastewater systems. New wastewater treatment systems are eligible for funding when managed centrally by the first nation.

I see that I am running out of time. I would like to once again highlight a couple of things our government has done, not only with

CMHC and not only on reserve but in tackling some of the environmental issues in our rivers and lakes. As I have said before, I know that the House is very familiar with the upgrades in Lake Simcoe and Lake Winnipeg through our government. Those are real investments.

These are ways the government can take concrete action without members simply bringing motions forward that have no opportunity of being binding on the government or even on their own parties.

I would like to thank the member for bringing forth this motion so that we have the opportunity to discuss and talk about some of the options. However, at the end of the day, it is important to recognize that our Conservative government is taking real steps to help our environment and to tackle some of the real issues rural Canadians face every single day.

•(1830)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I already congratulated the member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel.

I find that the government is being a bit disingenuous today. A member is not only proposing that we have a more extensive debate, so that we can work together to develop the necessary tools, but she is also giving the government a chance to take this and run with it. But now she is being accused of not acting in good faith because she is not capable of getting her own party on board. We have to call a spade a spade. This is a good motion and is a good way of doing things.

The government simply has to put the problem into context. Not everyone has access to municipal infrastructure. Twenty-five percent of homes, especially in rural regions, do not have access to the municipal sewer system. Instead of waiting until sewage becomes a problem, when we see the worst case scenario, we are calling for preventive measures.

I am part of the government that created the first one-third, one-third, one-third infrastructure program, and there were different components. Not everyone has a pipe running to their house, but we need to find a way to ensure that they have a good quality of life.

This is especially important because water quality is not the only thing at stake: it is also an environmental issue. Given that the Canadian government is already moving forward on other environmental measures, I am convinced there must be a way to reach an acceptable, respectful agreement that recognizes all jurisdictions.

The Government of Canada has done it before. We created something as part of the third component. We had green infrastructure. When I was minister of sports, we found a way to invest in recreational tourism. Recreation is under provincial jurisdiction, but there is also amateur sport, so we found a solution. The same thing applies to the environment.

*Private Members' Business*

My colleague is right: the situation is different here. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Fédération québécoise des municipalités lobbied for that cause, and I think it is a good thing.

Our role is to make people's life better and easier, and to create an environment that fosters agreements. That is why I asked my colleague a question—I am not sure she understood me. I wanted to know whether she had already talked with officials from the Quebec government, as they are used to this type of thing.

Municipalities are indeed creatures of the provinces, as was said at the time. However, we are facing a different set of circumstances. With the situation as it is today, we all have to work together without constantly coming down with “acute constitutionalitis”. We can do what is appropriate. Jurisdiction over the environment and infrastructure is shared and I do not see why we could not find a solution. Why make it simple when we can make it complicated, as the government does?

Instead of my colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel being lectured on procedure, she should have been congratulated, and not half-heartedly. She wants so much for this motion to be adopted that she is even giving the government a chance to seize the opportunity by telling her they will set up a program. There is no need to enact legislation when you create a program. The minister responsible for infrastructure should sit down with his counterparts, hold a federal-provincial-territorial conference to determine how things can be arranged, and create a program. An infrastructure program has already been proposed. Can it be adjusted, since 25% of houses do not have access to the municipal infrastructure level? It seems to me that we can find a solution. This is what we call common sense.

They will be pleased to hear me talk about common sense, since Premier Harris used to talk about common sense in Ontario. I offer them that at no charge. They do not have to pay me any royalties for it.

Clearly the Liberal Party of Canada will support this motion. There are ways to arrange for a program without treading on jurisdictional toes. If the official opposition needs us to, we will offer to work with them to try to make the government understand that this is in people's interest, because we are all first-class citizens.

• (1835)

[English]

**Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I am really pleased to rise today in support of today's motion to protect water and public health in rural communities. This is an excellent motion, and I applaud the member for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel for bringing it forward. She is bringing forward a sound policy idea.

As we heard in her speech tonight, she listened to her constituents and identified a gap in policy. Working with her community along with outside experts she came up with a creative policy solution to solve the problem. This is a perfect example of responsible representation by an MP and I am proud to say that the MP for Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel is one of my NDP colleagues. It is great work.

Motion No. 400 seeks to study the establishment of financial support programs to bring homes connected to a septic system up to a standard, with the aim of improving public and environmental health. This kind of program would make Canadians in rural communities, who are often left out of city initiatives, a priority. It would carry benefits both for the environment and the economy.

The federal government invests millions of dollars to bring municipal wastewater treatment systems up to standard, but more than a quarter of all Canadians, mainly in rural areas, are not connected to these city treatment systems. They depend instead on home septic systems. As it stands, 25% of Canadians are forced to pay out-of-pocket to maintain their septic systems on top of the taxes they pay for the municipal services they do not use.

Some may wonder why the member for Halifax would be standing to speak to the motion. My riding does include rural communities that are not part of the municipal wastewater system. I am pleased to tell the House that the motion has been endorsed by some communities in Nova Scotia.

I also support the motion from my perspective as the NDP environment critic. From an environmental and health perspective, a consensus exists that outdated septic systems in low income rural areas pose a threat to water quality and public health. Updating these systems is quite expensive and often too costly a project for Canadians.

The government understands the importance of maintaining high standards for wastewater treatment in cities. We need to establish the same high standards for our rural constituents. We have to develop a funding program for homeowners who do not have the means to ensure that their septic systems meet those environmental standards.

The member for Westlock—St. Paul said earlier in the House that he did think the motion was in federal jurisdiction. He said that government members would not be supporting the motion, keeping in mind of course that it will not be a whipped vote and that members will be free to vote as they want. With respect, saying that the motion is not within federal jurisdiction is just a way to duck the issue. This is a perfect opportunity for federal leadership.

I checked the website of the member for Westlock—St. Paul. He celebrates things on his website like \$9,000 that went to the Cold Lake Public Library flooring renovation and \$23,000 to the Gibbons curling rink for upgrades. Members might be wondering what in the world flooring upgrades and curling rink upgrades have to do with federal jurisdiction. That is a good question. These kinds of projects are federal issues and do fall within federal jurisdiction because the money comes from a community infrastructure fund. Why would the federal government not show leadership on something like Motion No. 400? Why would it duck this issue? Why would it not take real leadership and stand up for the health and environmental protection of our rural communities?

Motion No. 400 would be an important step toward increasing the equality of services for both rural and urban taxpayers. Rural living is becoming more expensive and services are becoming more difficult to access. Citizens in these areas are often unable to reap the benefits of many of the federal programs that we do see coming forward. We need to give rural Canadians the support they need to maintain the same standard of living as city dwellers, rather than force them to relocate to cities.

• (1840)

Further, the motion would help to protect both water quality and public health. Outdated septic systems are a major source of pollution in rural communities. They have been shown to contribute to the growth of bacteria in our water. By leaving these septic systems in their current state, we risk contaminating our drinking water, which of course poses a serious danger to the health of Canadians.

Water contamination can affect not only drinking water, but also aquatic ecosystems and beaches. A number of rural communities depend on this kind of tourism, and the economic losses that come with water contamination are serious.

In addition to supporting local economies, this measure would be of personal financial benefit. It could relieve rural Canadians of a disproportionate financial burden and allow them to participate more fully in their local economies. The motion would go a long way to solving those kinds of problems.

All of this means that rural communities would be strengthened if these measures were to be taken. The motion is a real and tangible way to improve the quality of life of rural Canadians, and it is actually part of a larger package of policies that the NDP is proposing to help rural communities.

The motion was inspired by a resolution of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities that flagged as a problem the lack of federal support for septic system upgrades. On behalf of their constituents, who are really our constituents, they are pressuring the federal government to act on this issue. The federation, along with over 70 individual municipalities on just the first day of debate, have all expressly supported Motion M-400.

The Conservatives say that existing federal funding meets this need, but the municipalities are vigorously disputing this claim. We have evidence from different municipalities saying that existing programs do not solve this socio-economic problem, and that the funding does not come close to the demand that exists. Federal investments in infrastructure simply do not target the distinct and widespread need for financial support for rural septic system upgrades. Current investment in this area is in no way comparable to what is spent in urban areas. Federal and provincial governments have contributed up to 85% of the cost to upgrade municipal water systems, but rural Canadians are forced to bear the full cost of upgrading their septic systems themselves, simply because of where they live.

I really hope, despite the fact that we have had some indications the government will vote against the motion, that all members will give serious consideration to this arbitrary inequality that leaves rural Canadians with a disproportionate economic burden.

### *Private Members' Business*

The federal government must carefully consider the implications of the current financing system for rural Canadians. As parliamentarians, we must take a good, hard look at the problem that families cannot afford to replace their septic tanks and maintain water quality in their communities. We have to explore the opportunities that could provide these Canadians with the financial support they need for important investments.

Canadians across the country have signed a petition calling on the government to consider establishing a financial support program to upgrade outdated septic systems for families in need. I echo their support of this motion, because I believe that rural Canadians deserve the same quality of service, the same health protections and the same ability to participate in their economies and society as every other Canadian. I believe that Motion M-400 does just that, so I am proud to support it.

**Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate on Motion M-400, which calls on the government to consider establishing a financial support program to help Canadians bring private residential septic systems up to standard.

The hon. member sees this as a means of protecting Canadian lakes, water quality and public health. Certainly, those are commendable goals, and our government is working hard to achieve them.

While I understand the good intentions with which the motion was put forward, the government will not be supporting Motion M-400. Since the regulation of septic systems is a provincial and territorial area of responsibility, we believe that the provinces and territories are best positioned to understand and respond to local issues of this nature.

Having said that, our government is doing its part to improve wastewater management and treatment. We have invested heavily in public wastewater infrastructure, providing approximately \$1.8 billion since 2007. This funding has contributed to more than 1,200 wastewater projects across the country, and on an ongoing basis, we are providing municipalities with \$2 billion a year through the gas tax fund, money that can be used to upgrade wastewater infrastructure through municipalities if they choose to do so.

The investment in the affordable housing framework announced by the federal, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for housing in July 2011 is another possible source of federal support. This framework provides for a combined investment of \$1.4 billion over three years to reduce the number of Canadians in housing need.

Provinces and territories are responsible for program development and delivery, and they certainly have the capacity to direct funding to upgrade private septic systems if this is considered a priority by them.

*Private Members' Business*

• (1845)

[Translation]

The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's mortgage insurance can also help homeowners get funding to repair or replace their septic systems.

[English]

With mortgage insurance from CMHC, qualified homeowners can refinance their mortgages for up to 80% of the value of their home, and then use the resulting funds to make improvements to their plumbing or other systems.

I would also like to take the opportunity to comment on an area where the government has found an important role with respect to household septic systems. This role is in helping first nations to provide better water and waste water services on reserve.

[Translation]

Hon. members on both sides of the House will agree that the living conditions for many first nations communities are below those of other Canadians.

[English]

Working in partnership with first nations, our government is taking action on a number of fronts, including supporting first nations in operating their waste water and water systems on reserve. Each year our government provides approximately \$197.5 million in water and waste water programs to first nation communities. This funding assists first nation chiefs and councils in their responsibility to plan and develop water and waste water systems on reserve. This is a significant investment, but we recognize there is more to be done to improve the health and quality of life for people in first nation communities.

Our government made a commitment to address on-reserve water and waste water issues on a priority basis, and subsequently released the "National Assessment of First Nations Water and Wastewater Systems—2009–2011". We identified three key areas of action: enhanced capacity building and operator training, enforceable standards and protocols, and infrastructure investments. Progress has been made in each of these areas, and I am pleased to say that even bigger improvements lie ahead.

Canada's economic action plan 2012 provided for new investments of \$330.8 million over two years to help first nations provide better water and waste water services to their residents. This investment, which is over and above the funding we provide annually, will sustain the progress that has been made to date in building and renovating water and waste water infrastructure on reserve. It will also support the development of a long-term strategy to improve water quality in first nation communities. As a result of this planned investment, risk levels will be reduced and access to clean water on reserve will improve.

Analysis shows that 60% of the risk identified in annual performance inspections of water and waste water systems relate to systems operations, maintenance, operator training and certification, as well as record keeping and reporting. To improve results in these areas, during the first year of this plan \$32 million will be invested in training for first nations, and an additional \$47.7 million

will be invested to support operations and maintenance. New investments will also be made to support the construction and renovation of water and waste water treatment facilities.

In year one, capital investments of \$47 million will be prioritized to target high- and medium-risk systems in over 50 first nation communities. Canoe Lake in Saskatchewan, Tallcree First Nation in Alberta and Nazko First Nation in British Columbia are among the communities that will benefit from this funding.

Finally, Health Canada will support first nations with an investment of \$27.4 million per year to build capacity, enhance monitoring, increase public awareness and review project proposals from a public health perspective. Chiefs and councils will continue to be responsible for public health measures such as issuing drinking water advisories to affected communities, communicating the information to residents and addressing drinking water quality challenges.

Once this two-year plan is fully implemented, our government will have invested approximately \$3 billion between 2006 and 2014 to support first nation communities in managing their water and waste water infrastructure. Clearly the government attaches great importance to this issue. We are making the investments needed to achieve results.

Another way our government is taking action is by introducing legislation that will enable us to develop, with first nations, enforceable drinking water regulations and standards to be applied on reserve lands. As hon. members know, Bill S-8, the safe drinking water for first nations act, was introduced in the Senate last year. The proposed legislation is the product of discussions between the government and first nations on safe drinking water legislation and enforceable standards over the past five years. Bill S-8 has been approved by the Senate and is now awaiting second reading here in the House. I urge all members to support this meaningful legislation.

In closing, let me reiterate that the proposal from the hon. member would take the Government of Canada into an area of provincial and territorial responsibility. For this reason, Motion No. 400 will not be supported by the government. We will, however, continue to work co-operatively with federal and provincial governments and with first nations to protect public health, preserve the environment and improve the quality of life of Canadians. We will do so by continuing to focus our attention and investments in areas of federal responsibility where they can have the greatest impact.

• (1850)

[Translation]

**Ms. Éleine Michaud (Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I am very proud to rise in the House today to support Motion No. 400 moved by my colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel. The motion seeks to protect the water and public health of our rural communities.

*Private Members' Business*

It is particularly important to me to support this motion because, in addition to the fact that I represent a mostly rural riding, issues related to the contamination of groundwater and the quality of water are of particular interest in my riding. In fact, the Jacques-Cartier River flows through my region and for the past few years has had high levels of TCE contamination. Although we are talking of another kind of contamination today, it is a particularly important issue for my constituents and for all those who live far from Canada's urban centres.

I would like to congratulate my colleague from Argenteuil—Papineau—Mirabel for presenting the motion in the House. She and I had the opportunity to attend the Federation of Canadian Municipalities conference held in Saskatoon last June. I found that her motion was well received by mayors and municipal councillors from across Canada. They appreciated her initiative.

According to some government members, municipalities are not interested in this type of program and want to continue receiving inadequate infrastructure funding. That is not true. That is not what I heard from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and that is not what I am hearing from the mayors in my riding.

I think it is worth quickly rereading the motion. I think some aspects have been misunderstood by the members opposite. Motion No. 400 calls on the government to:

...study the possibility of establishing [this is the important point], in cooperation with the provinces and territories, one or more financial support programs...that would bring up to standard the septic systems of homes not connected to a sanitation system, in an effort to ensure urban/rural balance, lake protection, water quality and public health.

One or more programs could be based on programs that the FCM proposed a few years ago.

The motion, therefore, in no way suggests overstepping provincial or territorial areas of jurisdiction. On the contrary, water quality is a matter of shared jurisdiction, and we are calling for a program to be developed in collaboration with our provincial and territorial partners. We are calling for all parties to take part in finding solutions, because this is a very important issue in our rural regions. I think that the government perhaps misunderstood this. I hope that we were able to clarify the fact that the motion is calling for co-operation with our provincial and territorial partners.

The motion deals with an issue that goes to the heart of the everyday concerns of thousands of Canadians throughout the country. It is extremely important both in order to reduce the economic burden on families living in rural areas and to protect water quality and public health.

It should not be forgotten that, often, rivers and waterways across rural regions and the urban centres get their water from these water sources, which cross agricultural areas and other regions where there are houses with septic tanks that, unfortunately, do not comply with current standards. Contamination may therefore occur in urban centres. This motion seeks to help all Canadians, regardless of where they live.

Today, as I rise to speak in this House, over 25% of Canadians do not have municipal sewage services and have no choice but to use independent septic systems on their properties. This is perhaps due to the fact that their residence is built on land that cannot be connected

to a pipeline network. There may be a whole host of factors. The residences may simply be too far from major urban centres, and residents may have no choice but to have autonomous sanitary facilities. Residents must pay for this themselves, and it is often very costly to replace or render compliant their septic tanks.

Every year, the federal government invests millions of dollars to help municipalities comply with very strict standards regarding their sewage systems, and yet, over a quarter of Canadians have been completely forgotten by the Conservatives.

It is high time that the government act and stop hiding behind bogus excuses about jurisdictional issues and whatever other unsubstantiated reasons they are giving as to why they are not supporting the motion.

• (1855)

In rural communities, many septic facilities that service isolated residences are no longer adequate and require major and urgent work to bring them up to standard.

Outdated septic systems are potentially a major hazard in terms of water quality and the health of all Canadians. For over 30 years, sewage from isolated residences has been recognized as a major source of pollution and eutrophication of our bodies of water.

Inadequate, outdated, tweaked, and non-compliant septic systems lead to an increase in the concentration of phosphorus in waterways, which may result in the excessive proliferation of cyanobacteria. These systems also represent a serious hazard when it comes to human health, especially when associated with the consumption of contaminated water, fish, and shellfish; the presence of waste on the shoreline; and water being exposed to contaminated sediments.

Unfortunately, due to the significant cost of replacing or standardizing a septic tank—the cost runs between \$5000 and \$20,000—some owners are forced to postpone the work, which results in an increased risk in terms of the quality of our waterways, and also public health.

This situation unfortunately occurs quite frequently in my riding, Portneuf—Jacques-Cartier, where almost all 28 municipalities have a large number of isolated residences that are served by self-contained septic systems. More than two-thirds of residences in many of the municipalities there are hooked up to septic tanks rather than to a municipal sewer system. That is a very large number.

Many of those municipalities have quite small populations—from a few hundred to a few thousand inhabitants—but are generally spread over an area of up to several tens of square kilometres. For those municipalities, which already have little in the way of resources, millions of dollars in investments would be required to extend their sewer systems to every residence in their area, which is utterly inconceivable for them.

*Private Members' Business*

Those municipalities take alternative measures to protect their water. The RCMs organize common septic pumping and inspection services. I am thinking, for example, of the municipality of Saint-Augustin-de-Desmaures. There were major problems with pollution in Lac Saint-Augustin, particularly as a result of non-compliant septic tanks, and the municipalities have taken steps to revitalize the shorelines and provide citizens with better information so that they can take measures to prevent lake pollution. However, those measures are not always enough. What is required are septic tanks that are up to standard and regularly inspected.

The federal, provincial and territorial governments will support the municipalities that need to build or renovate their wastewater treatment systems, but the rural communities unfortunately do not have access to those same services. It is absolutely unfair that taxpayers living in rural areas, like the citizens I represent, should have to finance the construction and maintenance of their septic systems on their own, whereas citizens living in urban centres receive a form of financial contribution for equivalent services.

At a meeting between the Leader of the Opposition and the mayors of the Jacques-Cartier RCM on January 23, the mayors stated very clearly that it was time for the government to act and stop making the false excuses we heard in the House today. In addition to calling for major investments in infrastructure in general, particularly in roads and water and sewer systems, the mayors were very much in favour of the measures that motion M-400 is calling for this government to consider.

The mayors of Jacques-Cartier and several other municipalities across the country know that this motion meets a genuine, pressing need expressed by the rural population, and they want to see tangible measures taken by the Conservatives, not just fine promises and hollow words, as we often hear.

This government has a responsibility to take all necessary measures to ensure that all citizens have access to good, high-quality drinking water, whether they live in town or in the country. The Conservatives have already told us they do not want to support the motion. They are trying to wash their hands of the matter by saying that this is a provincial issue and that there are already federal programs for this purpose. That is quite inconsistent. What is needed is action.

Like my NDP colleagues, I am very proud to support this motion. The Liberals have also told us they will support it. I hope the Conservatives will finally listen to their constituents, mayors and municipal councillors and decide to support this motion as well.

● (1900)

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton):** The hour provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

\* \* \*

[English]

#### **DISABILITY TAX CREDIT PROMOTERS RESTRICTIONS ACT**

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC)** moved that Bill C-462, An Act restricting the fees charged by

promoters of the disability tax credit and making consequential amendments to the Tax Court of Canada Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

She said: Mr. Speaker, as the member of Parliament for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, it is my pleasure today to speak in support of my private member's bill, Bill C-462, An Act restricting the fees charged by promoters of the disability tax credit and making consequential amendments to the Tax Court of Canada Act.

My intention for bringing this legislation before the House is straightforward. I want to see increased protection for disabled Canadians from the predatory practices of some disability tax credit promoters who see the tax credit as an opportunity to profit on the reduced circumstances of others.

The disability tax credit is a non-refundable tax credit that reduces the amount of income tax that either individuals with disabilities or their supporting persons have to pay. Parliament voted in this tax credit with the recognition that Canadians with disabilities face financial challenges.

Canadians may be eligible for the disability tax credit if all or substantially all of the time they are unable to perform one or more of the basic activities of daily living, even with therapy and the use of appropriate devices and medication.

Basic activities of daily living include things like speaking, hearing and eating. The wide array of disabilities eligible under the disability tax credit is important. As the member of Parliament for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, which includes CFB Petawawa, I am acutely aware of the number of disabilities with which Canadians are living. The soldiers and veterans of my community are at a greater risk for a number of disabilities because of the sacrifices they make for our country, and the tax credit is of particular importance to them.

For the average Canadian, the maximum federal amount that could be claimed last year was \$7,341. This resulted in a maximum federal tax savings of up to \$1,101 for 2011. This is significant tax relief for Canadians living with a disability, and that money should be staying in the pockets of Canadians who need it. It should not be swindled away by unregulated promoters. This tax credit is important to them.

My decision to introduce the legislation restricting the fees charged by promoters of the federal government's disability tax credit is a direct result of the aggressive tactics employed by some providers who objected to my decision to issue consumer alerts.

I started issuing consumer alerts in my riding last year when I found out that some individuals were being charged 20%, 30% or as much as 40% of the tax credit. I felt, and I am hoping that other members of Parliament will agree, that those kinds of charges are unfair, especially when we consider that the purpose of the disability tax credit is to support Canadians living with serious disabilities.

I wanted my constituents in Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke to know that they can access their federal member of Parliament regarding any federal tax credit without being charged a percentage of the tax credit.

*Private Members' Business*

Changes were put in place in 2005 that made benefits receivable on a retroactive basis. This created a new incentive for those claiming to be consultants to work with Canadians on their claims, as the dollar amounts on a 10-year retroactive tax refund can be significant.

I started to get a sense of how big an activity this whole tax credit promoter scheme is when a promoter complained about my consumer alert by telling me that he had spent \$25,000 on booking space, hotel rooms and media coverage. He expected to make his money back after driving the 905 kilometres to my rural eastern Ontario riding with his travelling road show.

● (1905)

His complaint was: How dare I tell the people to see their member of Parliament and let them have all of the tax refund they qualified for with the disability tax credit?

We are also not talking about a small number of Canadians. The Canada Revenue Agency receives on average 200,000 new disability tax credit applications each year. It is estimated that approximately 9,000 of these requests are received from taxpayers who use the service of a disability tax credit promoter. Last year alone, \$800 million in credits were issued.

I am still receiving phone calls and emails with complaints from these promoters. Many of the comments I have received are along the line that they are just helping our government to promote the disability tax credit and they deserve the fees they are getting. I could not disagree more. There may be legitimate companies doing this work. Unfortunately, it is the less scrupulous operators that have identified the need for the legislation I am proposing today.

I ask all members of the House to support Bill C-462. Concerns have been raised by medical professionals who feel they are dealing with an increasing number of fraudulent claims and have at times felt pressured to fill forms out fraudulently by constituents. I know this to be the case because doctors in my riding have told me that this has been their experience.

One doctor related the incident of having an individual sit in his office and refuse to leave until he filled out the disability tax credit certificate to get the tax credit. The doctor, giving his expert medical opinion, insisted on being truthful when asked to complete the tax certificate. This same patient, who had been encouraged in this behaviour by a disability tax credit promoter, was revealed to have visited four doctors previously, looking to have the certificate completed in such a way as to qualify for the tax credit.

Some consultants have even taken the step of employing in-house medical practitioners to sign the medical portion of the disability tax credit application, perhaps having only met the person just once and having no prior knowledge of the applicant's medical history.

Let us talk a bit about the credit. To qualify, an individual must have a severe and prolonged impairment in mental or physical functions, as defined by the Income Tax Act and as certified by a qualified practitioner. Eligibility is not based on the diagnosis of any specific medical condition, but is based on the effects of the conditions on an individual over a prolonged period of time.

Some examples of conditions that may qualify relate to walking. A person with no apparent mobility impairment, who is unable to walk a short distance without stopping frequently to rest because of shortness of breath or pain, may qualify for the disability tax credit because it takes him or her an inordinate amount of time.

Vision may be a condition. Someone who is suffering from a degenerative condition that will not improve with the use of corrective lenses or medication and has a severe visual impairment may qualify for the disability tax credit.

Hearing: A person who, even with the use of a device, is unable to hear or who takes significantly longer than an average person who does not have an impairment to understand spoken conversation may qualify for the disability tax credit.

Speaking: People who, even with therapy devices, are unable to speak so as to be understood and must rely upon other means of communications, or who take significantly longer than an average person who does not have the impairment to make themselves understood may qualify for the disability tax credit.

● (1910)

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. These are just a few examples, and the information is gathered directly from the Canada Revenue Agency website.

My intention in bringing the bill before the House is straightforward. I want to see increased protection for disabled Canadians from the predatory practices of some disability tax credit promoters, on the one hand, and also contribute to a fair, functioning marketplace for those who do wish to use the services of a disability tax credit promoter.

Bill C-462 would provide a new legislative framework to limit the fees charged by promoters for the services of assisting applicants for the disability tax credit. In particular, the bill would restrict the fees that can be charged or accepted by promoters to prepare a request associated with a disability tax credit, DTC, under the Income Tax Act. It would prohibit charging or accepting more than the established maximum fee and would introduce offences and penalties for failure to comply. The bill would introduce a requirement that promoters notify the Canada Revenue Agency when more than the maximum fee has been charged. The provision of the bill would come into force on a day to be fixed by the order of the Governor in Council, at which time the proposed maximum fee would be made public.

This is not an attempt to crack down on those legitimately claiming the credit or to deny claims. It is an attempt to make sure those who qualify and those who require the tax credit are able to receive it without paying unfair charges.

*Private Members' Business*

As member of Parliament for the rural eastern Ontario riding of Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, I understand, as does our government, that Canadians can have a difficult time making ends meet. As a result, we offer a very generous range of credits. These tax credits are a key component of our economic action plan, which is a plan for jobs, growth and long-term prosperity that is working for Canadians as we face a global economic downturn.

Examples of important credits include the universal child care benefit, the Canada child tax benefit, children's fitness tax credit, children's art credit, volunteer firefighters credit, first-time home buyers' tax credit and public transit tax credit, just to name a few. These are all credits I encourage my constituents to take advantage of, if they can, and to come to my constituency office where we will help them apply, no charge.

I have spoken to the minister and, to be clear, if individuals qualified for the disability tax credit in 2007 or 2008, say, and their medical situation is the same now as then, they would absolutely qualify for the credit. This is about protecting Canadians from predatory and unfair practices of unregulated promoters. This credit is not intended to line the pockets of promoters.

The disability tax credit promoters are currently totally unregulated. This is producing a system that is increasingly ripe for abuse. Lawyers charge contingency fees, but they are bound by strict codes of ethics, and bar associations carefully scrutinize actions to ensure appropriate professional ethical behaviour.

Perhaps most appropriate for today's discussion is that tax preparers are guided by the Tax Rebate Discounting Act and capped at what they can charge for their service. An accountant cannot take 20 minutes, prepare and submit one's taxes and then charge 40% of one's refund. Tax preparers also have a professional organization that promotes ethics and peer review of business practices.

I chose not to set a maximum fee in the legislation because I wanted to allow for consultations with disability groups, medical professionals and legitimate tax professionals to help inform this decision.

●(1915)

I want to ensure that disabled Canadians who do need the help of someone with their applications can get it and we are not imposing unnecessary red tape on doctors or legitimate tax preparers.

There is a rate set in the Tax Rebate Discounting Act for accountants and others who may be part of the discussion on the disability tax credit consultants. The rate under the tax rebate discounting allows for a \$45 fee on the first \$300 and 5% on amounts above \$300. This fee level is something I would expect would be raised during the consultations. There are no similar accountability measures for the disability tax credit—

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton):** Order, please. The time for the first speech is now at its limit. We now go to questions and comments.

The hon. member for Saint-Michel.

**Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I commend the member for introducing the bill. It is a

good idea. First, I am shocked a Conservative has presented a bill that would require more regulation, on which I am not totally sold.

In her bill, she says that the definition of a promoter means a person who directly or indirectly accepts or charges a fee in respect to a disability tax credit. Who is a promoter exactly? Is a doctor, or a lawyer or an accountant considered a promoter?

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent question from my colleague opposite. We are looking at third party promoters quite apart from the regular tax preparers and accountants. It is a new cottage industry that sprung up once the 10-year retroactive provision was made. It recognizes that there are volunteer organizations and even constituency offices that do this type of work. They help constituents fill out applications for tax credits. There is a provision for exemptions so people who volunteer their time at no charge or doctors do not fall into this.

**Mr. Brian Jean (Fort McMurray—Athabasca, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I commend the member for the bill. It seems very useful indeed. There are hundreds of millions of dollars going in unwarranted profits to people who would prey on the most vulnerable Canadians. I applaud her. I will be supporting the bill and I hope all members will as well.

Why specifically did she not set out a maximum fee in relation to the contingency fee charged? I know in Alberta there was talk of this for some period of time in relation to solicitor fees and that was capped at 30%, about 12 years ago, from an unregulated industry. I know that was met with much applause in the industry in Alberta. Did she do much research on this and why she did not set a particular maximum fee?

●(1920)

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for his indication that he will be supporting my bill.

The reason I did not set a specific fee is that we wanted to have consultations with the tax credit promoters and people with disabilities. Some people do want that extra help apart from the regular tax preparers. We want input from tax preparers, as well as accountants and medical professionals. We will be doing the consultations and announcing what the allowable fees will be at that time.

[Translation]

**Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, the member sitting nearby has just said that swindlers were putting hundreds of millions of dollars in their pockets.

What is the percentage of persons with disabilities who are entitled to a tax credit and are thus being defrauded?



*Private Members' Business*

[English]

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Mr. Speaker, I made reference to the promoter who said that he had spent \$25,000 on promoting.

In reference to the question on what number of people are eligible, CRA says that 200,000 new applications are received on a yearly basis. Insofar as what number of people are swindled or how much goes to the tax preparers, we do not know because it is totally unregulated. That is why we are putting these provisions into place so we can keep track and ensure that the tax promoters are being fair to Canadians living with disabilities.

**Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, first, I want to commend my colleague for introducing this bill.

Many of the people in Parliament have spent a lot of time with persons with disabilities. We quickly realize they are the most vulnerable. This bill drives at protecting and ensuring the most vulnerable are not taken advantage of, and I commend her that.

My question has to do with the services she provides in her constituency offices, without, I would think, any additional staff than would normally be in an office. How many constituents avail themselves of that service?

**Mrs. Cheryl Gallant:** Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Brant for seconding my bill and for all the work he has done throughout his lifetime in helping people with disabilities.

In terms of my office, we keep statistics. Now that the disability tax credit profile has been raised, we receive more people. On a weekly basis, we would probably see anywhere from 80 to 100 people and of those, there are maybe 20% on taxes. Again, it depends on the season.

On a number of occasions, we help people get their disability tax credit. It can amount to the tens of thousands of dollars if it is on a retroactive basis.

**Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak to Bill C-462, and I acknowledge that the bill was sponsored by the member for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke. I thank her for her work on this important issue.

I will be supporting the bill because, like the member, I believe it is necessary to establish limits on the maximum fees charged by promoters of the disability tax credit. However, it is my view that a study is needed to clarify certain sections of the bill and to provide insights on how certain shortcomings of the bill might be best addressed.

In my community of Victoria, and across the country, many of our fellow citizens are living with disabilities and many simply do not have access to the supports that they need. I would like to stress that for people living with disabilities, some of the biggest issues relating to the disability tax credit are simply not addressed in the bill.

The application process for the tax credit is not transparent and people with disabilities have trouble obtaining it. I would also like to see more information in advance on the way in which the bill would be implemented and how the public would be informed as to its existence and to the protections it would create.

I would like to see a simplification of the application process for the disability tax credit to make it more accessible for people with disabilities. I would like to see better protection against financial abuse and restrictions on fees charged by promoters of a disability tax credit.

Disability organizations, such as the Council of Canadians with Disabilities, the Canadian Association for Community Living and the myriad of organizations that represent specific disabilities, share our concerns about access to the disability tax credit.

It is my sincere hope that the Conservative members on the other side of the House will consider carefully the concerns that I and my NDP colleagues on this side of the House are bringing forward. I hope the necessary changes can be made to fill in some of the gaps in the legislation as it is currently drafted.

In this context it would be most appropriate for me to talk a little about my concern about the Conservative government's cuts to the Canada Revenue Agency, which have had a real impact on the services offered to all Canadians. Cuts to jobs and duties of regional program advisers, for example, put information sessions on disability tax credits at risk. These sessions facilitate the understanding of how to obtain the disability tax credit. Of course closures of CRA offices across the country have had a significant and ongoing impact on persons with disabilities who need access to the services provided by those centres.

Following major Conservative cuts to the federal headquarters, I understand that some 28 Canadian Revenue Agency counters were closed last fall. There is a fundamental issue to speak to on this point and a very serious question to ask.

If the CRA services were readily available for people with disabilities and if the process for accessing the disability tax credits were not so onerous in the first place, would the need have been created, which certain unscrupulous advisers have been induced to meet? In other words, if the forms and the statute were less opaque, the bill may not have been necessary, which is regrettable.

Ultimately, this should be approached as an issue of accessibility for people with disabilities. Ensuring accessibility is the work of so many incredible groups across the country. For example, in my riding of Victoria, I would particularly salute Inclusion Works, a family, grassroots-oriented group that recently won an award from the B.C. Ideas competition for social innovation and also won both the People's Choice Investments and Supporting People with Developmental Disabilities Investments awards.

In our view, the priority in order to ensure that persons with disability have equal access to disability tax credits should be to ensure that promoters cannot abuse the system. On this, I agree with my hon. colleague.

*Private Members' Business*

Persons with disabilities must receive the support they need. Unfortunately, the bill does not address the problem of accessibility. The CRA administrative process remains complicated and the tax credit difficult to obtain, especially when a person is not familiar with the application process. It is necessary, we agree, to establish limits on fees charged by promoters of this tax credit.

● (1925)

A “promoter” is defined as a person who, directly or indirectly, accepts or charges a fee in respect of a disability tax credit. I have concerns about this broad definition. It may be over-inclusive. For example, people accepting nominal gifts for their assistance would be caught by this definition.

We are not against all promoters. Some act as consultants to help people with disabilities obtain services and tax credits from the government, which they may otherwise not know how to obtain. However, we have serious concerns about a trend among less scrupulous consultants who seek to profit from a change in eligibility criteria. Following the 2005 changes to the criteria and specifically when the government started to offer retroactive tax refunds, promoters started to offer their services to taxpayers to help them maximize their refunds. There have been problems. An article on February 9, 2011 by the CBC exposed some of the abuses that people are suffering and to which my hon. colleague alluded quite clearly. Therefore, I have serious concerns about this situation as well.

It is my understanding that the bill prohibits promoters from accepting or charging a fee that exceeds the so-called maximum fee. It is important to clarify at committee just how and when maximum fees will be established and how the public is going to be informed about them. I would like to know how the Governor in Council will determine the maximum fee.

Unless otherwise exempted, promoters charging more than that fee will have to inform the minister of the fees charged. How will promoters know what the maximum fee is and how will they be made aware of the changes? What kind of promoter will benefit from an exemption? What are the criteria for such exemptions? Is there a danger of too broad a discretion being conferred on officials by this form of drafting? Similarly, does the formula for calculating the promoters' fee, as set out in section 3(2) of the bill, square with the fines set out in section 7?

I would like to know if the government has thought of clarifying the application process for the disability tax credit in order to address the real issue of accessibility and unnecessary complications associated with the current process.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I will vote to support the bill and hope that the necessary changes I have alluded to will be made to fix the problems with it. I will work to encourage those changes, but I return to my initial point. It appears to me that in conjunction with these legislative changes, government cuts to the CRA are creating a need for greater assistance and refusing to address the fundamental problem of the accessibility of the disability tax credit.

I would like to state again that we are not against all promoters. We recognize some act as consultants and help people with

disabilities to obtain the services and tax credits from the government they would otherwise not know how to obtain and to which they are entitled. However, we do need to fix some of the fundamental problems that are creating this situation and I believe that the bill in its current form fails to do that.

● (1930)

**Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.):** Mr. Speaker, I am going to read the summary of the bill because it is important to put the debate in context. It says:

This enactment restricts the amount of fees that can be charged or accepted by persons who, on behalf of a person with a disability, request a determination of disability tax credit eligibility under the Income Tax Act. It establishes a prohibition against charging or accepting more than an established maximum fee and establishes offences and penalties for failure to comply.

Based on that, I do not see how anyone can be opposed. I am comfortable with it and I will support sending the bill to committee. The Liberal Party has always supported cracking down on fraudulent consultants who take advantage of disabled Canadians or any type of Canadians, but especially disabled Canadians. However, we think Bill C-462 requires careful study at committee to ensure that it achieves the stated objectives and avoids unintended consequences.

[*Translation*]

We support the idea of a ceiling on costs to help protect those eligible to apply for the tax credit for persons with disabilities, but the maximum for such costs should be determined through an open and transparent process of consultation with those concerned, such as organizations for persons with disabilities and members of the medical community. The question is a complex and, above all, an important one. We should therefore adopt a rigorous approach to ensure that Canadians with disabilities receive as much help as possible from Canada.

We are also supporting Bill C-462 at second reading, in order to have it referred to committee for study to ensure that there are no unforeseen consequences, such as a reduction in eligibility for the tax credit for persons with disabilities. We also hope that the government will show good faith, listen to opposition members and make the required amendments to the bill, if necessary, in accordance with what we learn in committee. The only way of avoiding unfortunate consequences for those with disabilities will be to do a thorough job in committee. I trust the Conservatives will be able to set aside partisanship for such an important issue.

Despite the good intentions in the bill, I believe that the government could be more helpful to Canadians with disabilities by simplifying the application process through which they receive their tax credit. For example, the documents to be completed and the process itself are complicated—doctors have many responsibilities in this area—which means that many Canadians are not able to complete them without assistance.

If everything was simplified, many Canadians with disabilities could complete the forms themselves, which would avoid their having to rely on someone else to help them do so. Reducing the red tape and the processing time in this manner could also generate savings for the government. It would therefore be useful both for the government and for persons with disabilities to look into this aspect at the committee stage.

The Liberal Party also supports the idea that fraudulent consultants should be prosecuted to the letter of the law.

● (1935)

[English]

I just want to quickly highlight some of the concerns I found in looking at the bill. In the bill it states that the definition of a promoter is “a person who, directly or indirectly, accepts or charges a fee in respect of a disability tax credit request”. Would that mean a doctor or an accountant? I asked the question to the sponsor of the bill, and she seems to think it would not be, but that is not how the bill reads. I just want to make sure the bill will be corrected so that doctors, accountants or other professionals would not be included as being promoters.

I was looking at the requirement to fill out the disability form. Seven out of the eight pages of the form to request or to determine if one is eligible to claim the disability tax credit must be completed by a qualified practitioner, which means a medical doctor, physiotherapist, optometrist, psychologist, occupational therapist, special language therapist or audiologist. I do not think any of these should be considered promoters.

Again, are the doctors consultants or are they promoters? Should doctors not charge for their time, as some doctors do, or is it part of the medical services they provide through the health care system? I think this is one of the questions that should be asked at committee. I understand there are going to be some medical professionals, associations and representatives at committee, and that would be one my questions.

In my former life as an accountant, I found that the forms are more lengthy than complex. Usually doctors feel responsible for any inaccuracies on these forms and so they take a little more time. As I mentioned before, maybe we should just consider changing the way the disability credit is administered, instead of introducing more regulations and making the forms more complex. Perhaps we could have a simple one-pager and have a doctor's letter attached. This would be something the committee could study, to find a way to make it easier and perhaps less cumbersome to administer.

In my experience as an accountant, especially when the government introduced retroactively requesting a change as far back as ten years to the income tax form for a disability tax credit, the first year is normally the most complex time. Even though one may be using software, one has to determine which credits and deductions a client is eligible for and which are more advantageous. If one is claiming the disability tax credit, one may not be eligible for some other credits. As well, one's dependents would be a consideration. It is complex and one wants to make sure that the professional involved in preparing the tax return or giving advice is not being penalized because he or she has said to go and get the disability tax credit certificate.

The other problem I found as a professional accountant was not filling out the form but having the form filled out on a timely basis. Normally the form is given to the client or to the person who is representing a handicapped person eligible for the disability tax credit. The form is given to the doctor, who may not have time and puts it on his or her desk, and it takes forever to get it back. The tax return is either already filed or waiting for the form before being

### *Private Members' Business*

filed. Also, a lot of times the tax return is filed, but the revenue department may come back asking for more information. Therefore, it is a time issue more than a complex issue. This may be another area that needs to be addressed in committee.

When the committee addresses the promoter fees, who should be paid for their time and how would that be calculated? I saw that there was a formula, which is a little complex, in the private member's bill. However, a professional, and I will use the example of an accountant, would not necessarily charge based on a percentage because he or she is not allowed to do so. How do we avoid an accountant charging based on the fact that a person would get a \$20,000 or \$30,000 refund if he or she is eligible to go back and amend their tax returns for the last 10 or 15 years?

Personally, I agree with the bill. I do not believe that promoters should be taking advantage of the disabled. I do not believe that promoters should be paid at all, but I guess there has to be a way to promote this initiative. The government spends enough money on advertising, I do not see why we also have to pay promoters. I am totally against this and I am hoping other members will also be against this in committee. However, I am totally shocked that the Conservative government is introducing more regulations.

There is another reason that disability tax credits are very important. People may be eligible for the disability tax credit, but they may not get money back on their tax return. However, they can open up a disability savings account. That is very important and works for a lot of people in my constituency.

Again, I am in favour of the bill, but as I said before, the Liberal Party is not necessarily in favour of these tax credits. We prefer having these tax credits refundable so that the people who actually need the money, get the money.

● (1940)

**Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, CPC):** Mr. Speaker, I am certainly pleased to stand today to speak to this private members' bill that the hon. member for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke has brought forward. It is very important legislation.

Perhaps before starting, I would point out that I was very surprised to hear some of the comments by the hon. member for Victoria and the hon. member for Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel. If one actually looks at the application form, there is a small part that has to be done by the promoters. Actually, as someone who has experience in the health care field, as I go through the section that the medical practitioners fill in, it is very logical. It is quite a simple form, in terms of the areas that are non-applicable and that one can really target. Thus I find their comments about the application process surprising.

*Private Members' Business*

I have heard from many people about the responsiveness of the CRA when they have called it, and how willing, able and quickly helpful CRA is when dealing with any of these issues. I do not know if the hon. members were trying to find areas of disagreement for disagreement's sake. I think sometimes it would be nice to just look at what is a really good piece of private members' business, not government business, and to look at it in the spirit with which it was brought forward.

Certainly our government understands that Canadians have a difficult time making ends meet. As a result we offer a very generous range of tax credits. In fact, the tax credits are key to our economic action plan, a plan for jobs and growth that is working for Canadians as we face the global economic downturn. I could go on at length about some of those very important measures, whether the universal child care tax benefit or the home buyers' tax credit. These have been very helpful, as I hear every day in my office.

Since forming government, we have continued to lower taxes for hard-working Canadians. The average family now pays \$3,000 less in taxes each year.

We are certainly committed to enhancing the participation of people with disabilities. Through our policies and programs we support the full and equal involvement of those with disabilities in every aspect of Canadian life.

A key component of our strategy to assist the estimated 4 million Canadians with disabilities is the use of tax measures, particularly personal income tax provisions. As the House is aware, the Department of Finance is responsible for developing federal tax legislation in the areas of personal and corporate income tax. The Canada Revenue Agency administers this legislation and the various social and economic incentives delivered through the tax system.

One of the most important measures to help Canadians with disabilities is the disability tax credit. It recognizes that the cost of some disability related expenses can affect a person's ability to pay tax, and provides a tax reduction to people with a severe and prolonged impairment in physical or mental function. Their disability must be severe enough to restrict them in their basic activities of daily living or cause a person to take an inordinate amount of time to perform such activities, even with appropriate therapy, medication and devices. The restriction must be expected to last for a continuous period of at least 12 months and must be present at least 90% of the time.

People may also be eligible under the cumulative effect of two or more restrictions, which in combination are present 90% of the time. To claim this fund, the affected person or family members caring for him or her need to complete the disability tax credit certificate.

Members have talked about the process and the form, and how it certainly is a very sensible form. There is a section for a medical practitioner to fill out information on the impairment. Again, contrary to what the opposition members say, I think it is very sensible and well laid out. The first page is also very simple.

Once that step is complete and the CRA confirms that the person is eligible for the credit, the disability amount can be claimed on their income tax return. If for any reason someone with a disability or family member providing care needs assistance, there are agents

who specialize in the disability tax credit. They are available to assist taxpayers and qualified practitioners by providing information on both the criteria and the application process. They are readily available and very helpful.

As Bill C-462 underscores, however, Canadians with disabilities applying for the credit are not always treated fairly. In recent years the Canada Revenue Agency has witnessed an increase in the number of businesses promoting their services to people with disabilities and their families who want to apply for the disability tax credit, or the DTC. Often, these businesses are focused primarily on completing the application form. Again, it is that early section, part A, I referred to. They are charging up to 40% of the amount of the person's income tax refund, often amounting to thousands of dollars, for something that is very simple to do. That can hardly be called fair. People with disabilities receive as little as 60% of the amount they are entitled to receive.

• (1945)

In 2012, the federal tax savings for someone eligible for the DTC will be up to \$1,132 for adults, and can be as much as \$1,792 for a child under the age of 18 and/or the family member supporting them. Of course, as we have mentioned already, these can be claimed retroactively, so thousands of dollars are at stake. For the one in five 5 Canadians with disabilities, living on lower incomes, this can be a tremendous amount of money. We should not forget that disabilities are also frequently an issue with seniors.

The Government of Canada is committed to ensuring that all Canadians are treated fairly by the tax system. The disability tax credit should be given to the person for whom it was intended. To make sure that happens, Bill C-462 would restrict the fees that can be charged or accepted by businesses that request a determination of DTC eligibility on behalf of someone with a disability. That is the key point, which also speaks to some members' concerns about whom this is targeting. It is not targeting practitioners but the person who has submitted the eligibility form on behalf of someone with a disability.

The legislation would prohibit firms from charging or accepting more than an established maximum fee. That would be determined following consultations. We certainly do not want to interfere with a fair and free market and inadvertently hurt businesses that charge reasonable amounts consistent with the value of the services they provide. Our goal is simply to ensure that when Canadians with disabilities are eligible for the tax credit, especially if their claim goes back many years, they receive the maximum amount due to them.

To discourage those companies that charge their clients more than a reasonable fee, Bill C-462 would require businesses to notify the CRA of any fee charged in excess of the maximum amount permitted. If they fail to do so they would face fines of \$1,000 to \$25,000 for not notifying the CRA, or for any false or deceptive statements. A separate fine equal to 100% to 200% of the excess fees could also be applied in addition to the penalty. Such fines would be applied in serious cases, such as repeat offenders.

There is very little to fault in the legislation, which is why it earns my endorsement, with several small caveats. To enhance the bill's effectiveness, our government proposes three amendments. First, we want to strengthen the monetary value of the penalty so that it will represent more than just a return of profits. Without this amendment the penalty as written could be perceived as an unacceptable business risk. We also want to make sure that the provisions of the bill apply to all types of DTC promoters and preparers, regardless of how their businesses are structured. Finally, we want to ensure that the CRA is allowed to make full use of the information at its disposal to identify non-compliance and to enforce the provisions of the bill.

With these improvements, Bill C-462 earns my wholehearted support. I trust I can count on all members of Parliament to give their stamp of approval to this very worthy legislation.

● (1950)

[*Translation*]

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin):** Resuming debate, the hon. member for Montcalm has eight minutes remaining this evening.

**Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP):** Mr. Speaker, I support this bill because it will prevent abuse by disability tax credit promoters by restricting the fees they can charge for requesting a determination of disability tax credit eligibility on behalf of a person with a disability.

This is an entirely reasonable initiative because certain rather unscrupulous individuals are preying on less fortunate people. This is a major problem, and the growing number of promoters has resulted in cases of fraud, as evidenced by a 2011 CBC report.

I agree that a study is needed to shed light on certain issues and answer some questions. More information is needed on how the bill's provisions will be implemented. I will get into that a little more later.

Promoters must be stopped from abusing the system, but we must also realize that not all promoters are guilty of abuse.

Two things need to be considered. On the one hand, some promoters genuinely want to and can provide top-notch service to Canadians with a disability who would not be able to request a disability tax credit without their assistance.

A distinction must therefore be drawn between promoters who abuse the system and those who act as consultants and truly help persons with a disability to obtain a disability tax credit, which they undoubtedly would not have been able to secure on their own.

On the other hand, many promoters are swindlers who promise people that they will qualify for the disability tax credit, even though their eligibility is questionable, and charge fees amounting to as much as 40% of the benefits. It is truly disgraceful.

Nothing can justify their charging fees of this nature, especially given that tax refunds are retroactive and can result in payments totalling thousands of dollars.

Therefore, restricting the fees that can be charged by promoters is a positive move to prevent the abuse of persons with a disability.

### *Private Members' Business*

This bill will prohibit promoters from charging more than an established maximum fee set by the Governor in Council.

Of course, this raises questions like knowing how and when the public and promoters will be informed.

The fact that there could be exemptions for some promoters leads to the question of which promoters will be exempt.

The other important issue concerning the disability tax credit is the fact that those applying will also need to have government support. This support is being jeopardized by the government's cuts to the Canada Revenue Agency. Owing to the lack of resources at the agency, it cannot properly inform the public and make those concerned aware of the tax credit or deal with the demand by providing information sessions on the disability tax credit.

Staffing cuts, particularly for regional program officers, have led to the closing of CRA offices where Canadians are accustomed to meeting an advisor who can give them more information and direct them to the proper resources.

It is important to ensure that people with a disability have equal access to the tax credit, which is not currently the case. The bill does not solve any of the many problems with the tax credit, including accessibility.

The application process is still complex, and the tax credit is difficult to obtain. The application process therefore needs to be simplified.

Unscrupulous consultants focus on these people precisely because they know that the process is complex. The terminology and definitions used in the certificate are restrictive and unfair and lead to inconsistency and discrimination.

Participants have described the process of obtaining a tax credit as difficult, lengthy and exhausting. They have a great deal of difficulty understanding the form and in some instances, never complete it.

Some do not even take the trouble to apply because they feel that it is a waste of time. Under such circumstances, many turn to consultants.

Eligibility for the tax credit requires a significant impairment that prevents a person from taking part in everyday activities. This means that people with episodic disabilities or mental illness are often excluded. Indeed, it is difficult for them to prove that their everyday activities have been significantly altered, either because this is the case on some days and not others, or because they are physically capable of engaging in these activities, but incapable of doing so mentally or emotionally.

● (1955)

This determination based on the patient's basic activities of daily living is a real problem. The definition is restrictive and contradictory. It is contradictory because it differs from the provincial and territorial definitions to which practitioners refer and from definitions used by other programs, such as Canada pension plan disability benefits.

*Government Orders*

The other problem is that it depends on the understanding and good will of medical practitioners to fill in the required forms. Qualified practitioners have great difficulty filling in the certificate, especially in view of the complexity of certain disabilities and their evaluation according to the definition of the patient's basic activities of daily living.

Some people have been rejected simply because their doctor gave them poor advice, based on a mistaken understanding of the eligibility criteria. Even when the forms are filled in correctly, the decision about who is accepted and who is rejected can appear arbitrary and unpredictable. Any kind of family support may make a person ineligible for the disability tax credit because such support allows that person to function at a higher level. Many participants and practitioners question the reliability of the certificate on which the eligibility determination is based.

The tax credit was established to recognize some of the extra expenses that persons with disabilities have. It has become the prerequisite for almost all federal programs related to disability, such as the registered disability savings plan.

Thus, many people with disabilities are excluded from these income security programs that could help them attain a modest but sufficient level of income, to save for their future and reduce their stress levels. What we need, as soon as possible, is a plan to provide income security for all individuals with disabilities, including those with low incomes.

The programs now in place do not work together harmoniously to provide income security for people with recurring health problems. They include Canada pension plan disability benefits, employment insurance sickness benefits and registered disability savings plans. This all leads me to say that income support measures must work together to ensure real financial security for persons with disabilities.

Returning to the disability tax credit, the certificate specifies that to be eligible, a person must have a severe and prolonged impairment in physical or mental functions for a continuous period of at least 12 months. That effectively excludes people with recurring illnesses. The question is not new. It was raised by the Liberal government in 2002.

That said, I think the bill is essential in order to deal with the problem of abusive fees charged by promoters, and it is a good start. Still, a thorough study will be very useful.

• (2000)

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin):** The time provided for the consideration of private members' business has now expired and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

Pursuant to order made on Thursday, January 31, 2013, the House in committee of the whole will now proceed to the consideration of Motion No. 16 under government business.

I do now leave the chair for the House to go into committee of the whole.

**GOVERNMENT ORDERS**

[English]

**CONFLICT IN MALI**

(House in committee of the whole on Government Business No. 16, Mr. Barry Devolin in the chair)

**Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC)** moved:

That this Committee take note of the conflict in Mali.

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I am pleased to rise to participate in today's take note debate on the situation in Mali.

As members of this House will know, this debate is only one part of our government's commitment to engage parliamentarians in Canada's reaction to the conflict in Mali, following on the footsteps of last week's meeting of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

It is also in addition to previous briefings by senior officials held for members of both the NDP and Liberal Parties following a direct offer from the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It is our hope that we will find consensus on this important matter.

Late last March, a coup was undertaken by junior officers of the Malian armed forces, which brought an end to two decades of democratic government in that country. The junta, led by Captain Sanogo, deposed President Amadou Toumani Toure and took place despite the fact that presidential elections, in which President Toure was not a candidate, were scheduled to take place a month later, on April 29, 2012.

The coup in Mali was a major setback to the country's development plans and damaged its ability to protect an already weak northern Mali. It was a serious blow to that country.

Canada reacted quickly and strongly to condemn the coup and to demand the return of constitutional rule. On March 21, as soon as the first news of the coup was received, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas and Consular Affairs) expressed deep concern about the attacks by members of some elements of the armed forces on the presidential palace. They called on the perpetrators of these attacks to immediately withdraw and to respect democracy. They insisted that differences must be resolved by dialogue and democratic process to restore security and stability for the long term.

Two days later, to underscore Canada's insistence that Mali again find its way back to democratic and representative governance, both the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of International Cooperation took decisive and strong action to suspend direct bilateral aid transfers.

As one of the poorest countries in the world, Mali's government has had little ability to control the northern part of the country, and in the past decade, terrorist groups have been able to work freely in the region. In January, the main rebel Malian group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, or MNLA, following the return of armed Tuareg rebels from the Libyan army, attacked Malian forces and started to advance from the north.

*Government Orders*

The MNLA was supported by foreign terrorist troops, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM, as well as by the Salafist movement Ansar Dine, comprising both Malian and foreigners. Following these attacks, the Malian army collapsed.

The March 2012 coup that toppled the government led to political disorder, which permitted various groups of Islamists and extremist militants to drive out Malian government forces and capture the northern two-thirds of the country. For the first time in history, terrorist groups were in control of a large geographic area that could have served as a base for destabilizing southern Mali and neighbouring countries in the absence of a constitutional government that could serve as a legitimate interlocutor with the international community.

The occupation of the north worsened the already precarious humanitarian situation in Mali, where approximately 4.23 million people have been affected by the humanitarian crisis. The terrorists imposed a harsh form of Sharia law and destroyed many protected cultural sites in the town of Timbuktu.

The UN Security Council, on December 20, 2012, adopted resolution 2085, which wisely places emphasis on both the political track and the security track to resolve the situation in Mali. To that end, our government has been actively exploring ways to support resolution 2085 and the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union in finding a sustainable solution to this crisis.

In response to an invitation from Mali for support in stopping a terrorist advance into the south, France started air strikes in Mali on January 11, 2013. Canada supports the French initiative. We believe that the establishment of a safe haven for terrorist groups in this region is a threat to Mali, to its neighbours and to the broader international community.

At France's direct request, Canada was pleased to extend, after an initial one-week period, a CC-177 Globemaster aircraft until February 15, 2013, for a total of one month, to move French equipment and personnel to Mali's capital of Bamako. It is important to note that this aircraft is only available to France and that this aircraft and Canadian armed forces personnel have not been and will not be part of combat operations.

Throughout this process, we share with our partners and those in the AU and ECOWAS the objective of Mali's return to fully democratic and constitutional rule.

● (2005)

Our government strongly believes that there can be no progress on a political track without security in Mali. There cannot be long-term security in Mali without the political stability brought by a democratic government. We must support the return of a government in Mali whose political legitimacy is achieved through free and fair elections.

On January 17, 2013, Canada's ambassador in Bamako, together with the ambassadors of the U.S., U.K., France, Denmark and Sweden, urged interim President Traore and his government to present a road map to restore democratic governance. We are pleased that 12 days later, the Mali National Assembly unanimously adopted

the road map to elections. These polls are to be held at the end of this July.

Last week, at a specially convened African Union meeting to raise funds for the African-led international force in Mali, or AFISMA, which was created under United Nations Security Council Resolution 2085, and for the Malian security forces, the international community pledged \$455 million to support international efforts against terrorists and extremists in the Mali and Sahel regions. Canada announced an additional \$13 million in humanitarian assistance for Mali. This new funding will be channelled through NGOs and international organizations.

Canada stands ready to help a democratic Mali build a better, brighter future for all Malians, as they hope to maintain their country's territorial integrity. While we are hopeful that the actions being taken by the interim government to restore democratic governance in Mali will result in positive steps for that country, we remain vigilant and want to ensure that words are not only words but are followed up by real action.

Canada will be monitoring the implementation of this road map to confirm that it is implemented in a manner in which civilian authority is reinforced and fully restored in the lead-up to and during the presidential and legislative elections. We need to be clear on where we hope Mali will be one year from now and two years from now. We want a stable and peaceful partner to address the real needs of the Malian people and the security threats that straddle man-made borders.

Canada will work diplomatically and with our allies on how to address the many complex facets of the situation in Mali. We look forward to today's debate.

**Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP):** Mr. Chair, there is an analysis I think is important when it comes to the situation in Mali right now. It is that this is a regional situation; it is not just about Mali. I think the parliamentary secretary mentioned that.

There has been some concern on our side in that, unfortunately, the government is actually retreating from Africa, particularly this part of Africa. I note that this year, there will be \$377 million in cuts. Disproportionately, 62% of those cuts will come out of Africa. We have shut four embassies in Africa. The countries of focus we had have been reduced by eight.

My colleague said that we supported the road map, which is great. I support that as well. The EU was instrumental in that and supported it. The problem, though, is that we have not put our money on the table when it comes to the road map, separate from the \$13 million. We have about \$18 million or more for the C-17.

I would ask my colleague if the government intends to financially support the road map, and if so, when and with how much.

● (2010)

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Mr. Chair, I thank my hon. colleague for his question and his participation in the foreign affairs committee hearings on this very important matter.

*Government Orders*

As the member would know, in addition to the \$13 million of new money for humanitarian assistance directly related to the internally displaced persons in Mali as a result of this crisis, Canada has been one of the largest donors to Mali in the international community for more than 20 years. In fact, Mali is one of Canada's top 20 countries of focus. Since 2007, the Canadian government, through various CIDA projects, has been spending, on average, over \$110 million each and every year in Mali.

It is certainly not the case that Canada is abandoning Mali or any other part of Africa. In fact, we are putting in more money than ever, and we are one of the largest donor countries in the world in that region.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I would like to thank my hon. colleague for his speech. I noted with interest his statement that Canada will be willing to support a democratic Mali in the future.

Could my hon. colleague tell us what Canada should do, not only to support a future democratic Mali, but to help that country create a democracy and democratic institutions?

[*English*]

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Mr. Chair, as the hon. member will know, of the \$110 million Canada has been spending each and every year for several years now in Mali, some of that programming was in fact for the building of democratic institutions in Mali.

Mali was, prior to the unfortunate coup in March 2012, one of the most successful democratic countries in Africa. We hope that, after this short crisis, it will return to being that very successful democratic country.

Canada will continue to support Mali, as it has in the past. Of course, the government is always open to suggestions. We are negotiating and speaking frequently with our allies in the region and with the Malian government about how we can best support the return to democracy in Mali.

I will be clear that Canada will hold the current government of Mali to that road map to ensure those democratic reforms actually occur and those free and fair elections take place this July.

**Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, members have been encouraged by the initial success of the French forces. I am sure the hon. member agrees with me on that point. It is fairly clear that the French wish, as do we, to hand off the military part of the security as soon as possible to African-led initiatives.

It is therefore curious that the government has not participated in the \$450 million funding of AFISMA, which is the main African-led security entity, which will be the entity that steps in to deal with the Islamist threat.

My question to the hon. member is fairly simple. Why is it that Canada has not helped with the funding of AFISMA?

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Mr. Chair, as the hon. member will know, and I think he made it very clear in his question, the key word is that it is African-led. Canada thinks that is important. Most of the interna-

tional community thinks it is important that, in fact, the solution in Mali is an African-led one.

Canada is contributing more than \$18.7 million through the supply of the CC-177 Globemaster III aircraft and the crew involved. We are also addressing the humanitarian needs. Through our CIDA programs, we will continue to fund and work on the development of the democratic institutions in that country.

I should also point out, in terms of humanitarian aid, that Canada has supplied food and nutrition assistance to some 1.3 million people in Mali, as well as to 142,000 refugees in Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. It has supplied lifesaving water and sanitation assistance to more than 49,000 people in that country and the surrounding region, as well as vaccination of more than 58,000 children in that country, who are being displaced because of both the humanitarian and drought crises in the region.

● (2015)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I am worried that the debate has started off on the wrong foot. The hon. member was asked two very specific questions, but he danced around them instead of responding. I will repeat them, and hopefully this time he will answer.

Our colleague from Laurier—Sainte-Marie asked him what the government is willing to do to help the Malian government on its journey toward democracy. The Government of Mali has had its funding cut. It will be very difficult to be effective in Mali if we are not working with the government.

The Government of Canada asked for a road map. That was the right thing to do. Since we are working towards a road map and an election, why not cautiously restore direct relations with the Malian government as much as possible? That was the first question that did not get answered.

Second, the member was asked why we are not involved in the UN initiative to help train African troops to be effective and disciplined so that the locals are treated decently and so that missions are effective. Why is the Canadian government not taking part in this initiative when so many of our allies are? It is easy to say that Africans must take charge, but it is our role to help them take charge. I hope that this time, we will get some answers to these specific questions.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Mr. Chair, I guess it is the position of the member's party, the Liberal Party, that Canada would give money directly to a government that is not democratically elected today. This is a government that came about as a result of a military coup. Perhaps that is the Liberals' position. It is not a position that this government would take, and I do not think it is a position that Canadian voters and taxpayers would want us to take.

However, we will be assisting the democratically elected government that will emerge from the free and fair elections in July, we hope. We will continue to support the democratically elected government of Mali in the future through the democratic development programs that we have done in the past.



*Government Orders*

With respect to the member's question about support for training or putting soldiers on the ground, it is certainly not our government's position that Canadians should be involved directly in any combat mission in harm's way in Mali, but I hope he would know that Canada has participated in training ECOWAS troops in surrounding countries over the last several years, and they have been quite successful. Soldiers from some of those countries are participating in the African-led force that is fighting against the rebels in Mali.

Canada has made a fairly significant contribution there, but if it is the position of the Liberal Party that Canadian soldiers should be involved in combat operations in Mali at the front lines, that is not something this government is going to support or promote.

[Translation]

**Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I am honoured to take part in this important debate on Canada's role in the conflict in Mali.

[English]

This debate helps us provide much-needed oversight of Canada's actions with regard to Mali. From the outset, the government's position on this situation has been inconsistent. Ministers have sent mixed messages. One said there would be military trainers on the ground in Mali, and then another said there would not be.

The Prime Minister announced the contribution of a C-17 aircraft for a week, and then it was a month. The government said it was giving additional aid, and then it said it was not, and then it said it was. This is a government whose foreign policy is guided by drift.

This approach of deny and delay is not good policy, nor is it strong leadership. The government must be clear about both the purpose and the level of our commitment. Canadians deserve to learn about Canadian foreign policy from their own government, not from the Twitter feeds of foreign leaders.

That is why the official opposition New Democrats decided that parliamentary oversight of the Mali mission was urgently needed through debate in the House and study at the foreign affairs committee.

• (2020)

[Translation]

The Government of Canada needs to be honest with Canadians. It is as simple as that.

[English]

When we take part in a conflict, when we put our people and resources on the line, we must take every step with our eyes wide open. From the beginning, on this side of the House, we were taking the advice of the United Nations. On October 12, 2012, the UN Security Council, which has the primary responsibility for international peace and security, adopted resolution 2070 on Mali.

[Translation]

The resolution talks about a humanitarian crisis that is rapidly deteriorating.

[English]

It talks of widespread and serious human rights abuses against civilians: killing, rape, hostage taking, pillaging, theft, destruction of cultural and religious sites, recruitment of child soldiers, the very worst of crimes.

[Translation]

The situation in Mali poses a threat to international peace and security.

[English]

For that reason, New Democrats were steadfast in our support for an international coordinated response to the crisis in Mali. While the Conservatives were dithering, we called on the government to support these international efforts. The role of the international community in Mali is evolving and Canada needs to be engaged and involved.

Most immediately, Canada needs to support the ongoing transfer of command to the African-led AFISMA force. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been raised internationally to help AFISMA. Not a single dollar of it was Canadian.

Canada must also monitor and engage with the growing possibility of a substantial UN peacekeeping force in Mali. Sadly, Canada will not be at the table when the subject comes before the Security Council. The government's alternation between disengagement and divisiveness has weakened Canada's voice on the world stage, but that should not stop us from engaging in peacekeeping and peace-building.

The political situation in Mali is complex and constantly developing. We are encouraged that the interim government agreed to a road map for political renormalization, but long-term peace and development in Mali will require negotiation and peace-building with the groups and individuals holding local power in the rural north.

[Translation]

This is the fourth time the Tuareg minority has rebelled against the central government. Peace cannot be maintained if the minority's grievances are not addressed.

[English]

When we take a look at the situation on the ground, it is important that we differentiate between the diverse groups involved.

*Government Orders*

Tenuous links last year between the main Tuareg rebel group, the MNLA, and the radical Islamic group, the Ansar Dine, have long since dissolved. The two groups do not share ideological or political goals. The Tuareg population has been campaigning for an independent territory in northern Mali ever since Malian independence in 1960. Radical Islamist groups are a more recent phenomenon. For instance, the group known as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb was first developed in response to the Algerian military's secularization of the country in the 1990s. It is an example of how events in one country can easily spill over into another, just as weapons from Gadhafi's Libya spilled into Mali, enabling the rebellion that sent this country into crisis. Small arms that were unleashed before and during the Libya conflict have played a significant role in fuelling this conflict.

I call upon the Conservatives to stop playing a spoiler role in negotiations for arms trade treaties so that we can prevent future crises.

Despite the MNLA's support for the international intervention and its rejection of terrorism, there are worrying reports of continued vengeance attacks against Tuaregs by Malian soldiers and civilians.

● (2025)

[Translation]

Social reconciliation in Mali will be a long-term challenge. Any action taken in that regard cannot be effective without the development of democracy.

[English]

In 2007, the government supported the creation of a new agency tasked with promoting international democratic development. What a great contribution that agency would have made, at this time, in the Middle East and Africa. However, the promise was not kept.

Then the government promised it in 2008. The promise was not kept. Then it promised it in 2009. The promise was not kept. Then the government stopped talking about it.

In the years that followed, Rights and Democracy, the closest thing we had to a democratic development institute, was systematically dismantled and destroyed—an obvious mistake at the time, a historic blunder in retrospect.

While the radical Islamists controlled the northern part of Mali, they committed numerous and egregious human rights abuses, including amputations and killings under Sharia law.

At the same time, we are all concerned by recent allegations by human rights groups of abuses by the Malian army, including summary executions and tortures. These allegations demand investigations.

Canada must be standing against all violations of human rights, and we must build capacity in countries like Mali to end human rights violations committed by armed forces.

[Translation]

In addition to serious abuses, chronic problems persist. The Sahel region is facing a huge food crisis. Half of Mali's population is living on \$1.25 a day. The need for humanitarian assistance is urgent.

[English]

Some 390,000 people have been displaced from northern Mali.

The UNHCR has reported that displaced people are already beginning to return to some parts of the country previously controlled by the extremists. Swift action is needed to monitor and secure the flow of people and ensure that everyone can return home safely, soon.

However, we cannot confine ourselves just to Mali's borders. Weak governance throughout much of West Africa creates a serious risk that conflict and crises could spill over. A whole of region approach is needed to achieve long-term peace and security and development.

Canada has the experience and the ability to take a leading role in this capacity-building effort. Unfortunately, this is made far more difficult by the government's political and financial withdrawal from the region. By closing our embassy in Niger and by disproportionately cutting development assistance to Africa, the government has weakened Canada's ability to lead.

Canada should be a leader in resolving the current crisis and in helping the Malian people build a better future. We are not doing that yet. We have not come up with what the world expects of us, and we have not come up with what Malians need.

[Translation]

We can do better. We must do better.

[English]

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, the member is unfortunately factually incorrect about something very important he mentioned both in his speech and in his earlier questions and it is incumbent upon me to correct him. Canada did not close its diplomatic mission in Niger. In fact, it did not have a diplomatic mission there. It had a CIDA office in Niger and the Canadian ambassador to Niger then, as now, is accredited from Bamako, Mali. Perhaps he should look into the history and correct himself on that. That would answer a lot of the questions he was asking himself in his speech.

In addition, the member should know that despite the CIDA office in Niger being closed, Canada continues to have significant diplomatic missions in Bamako, Dakar, Abidjan, Accra, Abuja and Cameroon, all in the area. I do not think it can be fairly said that Canada is reducing its diplomatic representation in the region.

Could my colleague comment on his quote on January 8 on CBC when he said, "We would be very different. This is what the NDP would be doing right now. First of all, we'd be engaged with peacekeeping, peacebuilding and conflict resolution". That sounds like Canadian troops in the region. Perhaps he could explain that.

*Government Orders*

• (2030)

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Mr. Chair, it is interesting that the member mentioned Niger. I did underline the point that we were retreating from Africa in development and diplomatically. We have closed embassies.

I want to enlighten my friend about the fact that the government has retreated from peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Canada is 53rd now in contributions to the UN when it comes to that.

A significant document just came out in January from the UN, which lays out what peacekeeping and peacebuilding is about. I will share that with him later. It is about ensuring that we resolve conflict, that we use resources not just troops and that it goes through the UN. I welcome him to look at that.

The problem the government has is that it cannot deal with the facts. It is basic arithmetic. We will be cutting \$377 million from the CIDA budget. That is the government's numbers. This means that disproportionately we will be hurting Africa. What is the government's response when we ask it what it is doing there? It tells us that it has sent our trade minister there and he is in Nigeria trying to negotiate free trade agreements. I am sorry, but when the house is burning, one does not try to get a better mortgage.

The situation at hand has to be dealt with. The government does not understand that we have to be present, that we have to commit resources, that at the last minute we cannot pretend that we are contributing, because that just does not work.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I hope our colleague from Ottawa Centre might expand on his assertion, which he touched on briefly in his comments, with respect to the government's overall approach with respect to the African continent.

The Liberal Party believes the government has by and large turned its back on Africa. It is not interested in developments socially, economically or culturally that have taken place in Africa. We have closed consulates and embassies. We have reduced Canada's presence on the African continent. Obviously now we are dealing with a very difficult and real threat posed by the extremists in Mali and with the possibility of spreading to other regions of that continent.

Could the member for Ottawa Centre, who has considerable experience in foreign affairs, share with the House and Canadians his view on the government's failure to engage in a broad dialogue with partners in Africa in a way that we would have much more influence than we do arriving at the last minute when, as he said, the house is on fire, trying to work with others to help put out the fire?

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Mr. Chair, the best way to understand the government's approach to Africa is to remember a very historic foreign affairs committee meeting when African ambassadors came to our committee. This was very unusual. They came because they had not been consulted when their countries' budgets had been cut. It was a basic communication. I know the government would say that it did not cut as much as they were suggesting, but it was a matter of just understanding that to have a relationship and a respectful they had to be engaged. The fact that right now we have a government that is more focused on trade deals in Africa than dealing with the present crisis underlines it all.

Finally, we also have to understand that this is about how our country is represented not just in Africa. What is Japan contributing? Over \$100 million when we contributed \$13 million. In case members of the government side did not understand, Japan does not have the same historic relationship we have had with the region or the country.

It is a matter of does the government want to deal with the situation in a historic Canadian way or will it just do it on the seat of its pants? As I said, it seems to be a government that is guided by drift.

• (2035)

**Mr. Bob Dechert:** Mr. Chair, my NDP colleague and his party want to keep throwing money at Africa. They apparently think entering into trade agreements is not the right thing to do. They talked about Nigeria being on fire. Nigeria is not on fire today.

The Minister of International Trade recently visited Nigeria and Ghana on a very successful trade mission. It was unrelated to the crisis in Mali. We believe the solution to Africa is to help these people build their economies, to give them a hand up not just a handout.

The NDP wants to keep shovelling money into Africa. That has not worked. We want to build trade, jobs and prosperity for the African people. That is what Canada and this government are doing.

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Mr. Chair, the member's question displays in graphic detail the problem with the government. I gave an analogy that a part of the region of Africa was on fire and that it was not the time to talk about trade deals as the solution, which is what happened when we asked their own officials at committee. We asked what the government was doing right now in Africa. The response was that the minister was on a trade mission in both Nigeria and Ghana. That was not the question. The question was what the government was doing right now about the region that needed our help. It does not need the Minister of International Trade negotiating a trade deal. That is for later. Today it is about helping the people of Mali.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ):** Mr. Chair, my colleague put his finger on the problem when he said that ever since this government came to power in 2006, CIDA has really turned its back on Africa.

Would he not agree that ideology is what is behind all this? The Minister of International Cooperation himself has said and done things that fly directly in the face of what Canada has always done in the area of international aid, particularly in Africa and especially francophone Africa.

*Government Orders*

That is what is happening in Mali right now. I think we need to do more in tonight's debate than simply criticize this laxness. This is a clear, deliberate reflection of this government's ideology, as the Conservatives themselves have said. The Minister of International Cooperation has said so. They treat international aid as though they are doing business. Their priority should of course be to eliminate poverty. However, assistance to Mali at this time is woefully inadequate, probably because of the Conservative government's new ideology.

[*English*]

**Mr. Paul Dewar:** Mr. Chair, it is interesting to watch the government in terms of how it applies what in fact is the mandate of CIDA, and that is to alleviate poverty, et cetera. It seems to be going down the path of wanting to support private enterprise, which we have no problem with, but whose private enterprise? Are we there to support our private enterprise or the private enterprise of the people in the region?

The Conservatives have changed their programs away from what we have considered the mandate of CIDA to look to support Canadian enterprise in other countries. Not only does that suggest ideology, it is really bad public relations when we are trying to help a country and what we are offering is support for Canadian enterprise and not private sector people on the ground in those countries we are trying to help.

**Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I appreciate the fact that the government has given us the opportunity to have this discussion tonight. I want the Canadian public to know that the Prime Minister spoke to the Leader of the Opposition on this subject and I also had a chance to speak with him as well.

From the Prime Minister's comments in our one discussion, and I had a couple of discussions with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, I had a sense of deep caution on the part of the government. I had a sense that it was looking for support and a broad consensus in the House of Commons as to what would be appropriate for Canada to do.

I will tell the House what I told the Prime Minister. I said that we live in a shrinking world. We live in a world where violence in one corner, whether it is Timbuktu, Gao, Kabul or anywhere in the world, places that perhaps Canadians 15 or 20 years ago would have said what did it matter if people were killing each other in some place that seemed to be far away. The answer to that simple question is, it matters a lot, not only morally, not because we are morally connected to what goes on in the entire globe, but because our interests, our security interests are directly affected. We cannot afford to be narrow, isolationist or small minded about how we look at problems in places far away, so we have to avoid thinking in that way.

We also have to avoid thinking ideologically. It was the great Conservative, Edmund Burke, who said once that there was no greater menace than to govern in the name of a theory. We cannot govern in the name of a theory. We cannot say that we think Latin America is more important to us than Africa, which the Conservatives did say. They said that they would concentrate more on one part of the world than another.

We cannot afford to say that we will not fall in with the United Nations, that we will do it on our own. The reality is we do these things together.

Yes, the government has been very careful to say it will give the French a cargo plane for a week. What if the conflict lasts more than a week? What if it lasts beyond February 15? The parliamentary secretary says that we will find out. Yes, we will find out. Therefore, I do not know why the Government of Canada would not say that it takes this conflict seriously and that it will keep its plane running as long as it feels it is necessary to protect the security of Mali, to protect the security of West Africa, to protect the security of Canada and to protect the security of the world. Why would we not take that position?

● (2040)

[*Translation*]

I am not suggesting that we should consider free trade as unimportant, because how could we make Africa safer, then? We cannot look at safety and terrorist cells in Africa without also considering Africa's prosperity.

Africa's prosperity and economic success has obvious links with the political context and the safety of populations, as we know. We cannot export a blueprint for democracy the same way we export cars or minerals.

I believe that some ideas and values are universal, such as freedom, freedom of speech, equality and the need to respect the dignity of every person. But the most vital and critical issue at stake is safety and terror. We need to say it, we need to say the word out loud. We should not be afraid to say that there is terrorism involved.

Terrorism is a problem not only in Africa, but around the world.

The organization responsible for the worst human rights abuses in Northern Mali has been labelled a terrorist organization not only by the United States, but also by the UN.

[*English*]

We have seen an important evolution in international governance and international law. We now have a situation where the United Nations is naming non-governmental organizations that are a threat to the stability and security of the world. We should not think that this list is limited, or that it will not find itself in some other part of the globe over the next 5, 10, 15 or 20 years. We do not know.

President Obama gave a great inauguration speech, but he said one thing with which, personally, I disagree. When he said a decade of war is over, I can only say, with great respect to the president, that we do not know that. We should not assume that, knowing how dangerous the world has become. Nor should we say that we will deal with this in an ideological fashion, or that we think that there is a military solution to everything.

I know the parliamentary secretary is going to be on his feet saying, "Should there be Canadian boots on the ground?" We know there are special forces now in Mali. I have said publicly that I have no objection to that. If it is necessary for special forces to be there to protect Canadian interests, then they should be there. We should not be shy about that.

*Government Orders*

However, we also need to understand, as my colleague from Ottawa Centre pointed out, that it is a complex situation. It is security. It is democracy. It is an issue that goes right across north Africa. Therefore, we need a comprehensive approach.

The government seems to have a philosophy, which was once associated with a former leader of my party, Mackenzie King, of whom it was said he would never do by halves what he could do by quarters. I would hope that the government would not be quite so cautious. I would hope that the government would explain to Canadians why these things are connected, why a country, which many people could not even place on a map, nor could they name the countries that surround it, is important to the world and is important to Canadian interests. If there is instability in Mali, there is instability in Mauritania. We have two distinguished Canadian diplomats who spent 133 days captured by terrorist forces. Are we going to sit around here and say we do not really think these are critical interests?

My view is that we should be very clear. We support the United Nations, not in some kind of blanket way that says whatever the UN says or does is right, but when the United Nations Security Council says there is an interest, Canada should take an interest.

It is interesting that the Minister of Foreign Affairs was explaining to reporters the other day why Canada was not able to do more in Syria. What did he say? He said there is no Security Council resolution that would allow us to do more. Now we have a Security Council resolution, which is why I say Canada should not be so timid. We should not be so reserved. We should be supporting. As the parliamentary secretary said, it should be African led.

I said that to the Prime Minister. I said that to have a mass of Canadian troops going in would not necessarily be the wisest course, but nor should we reject the principle that we can train, we can be present and we should never say on a blanket basis that there will never be a Canadian troop in Mali. That is not sensible.

We have to take steps against terror and, to put it in colloquial language, we have to whack them back. We have to give them a disincentive to violence, a disincentive to terror and a disincentive to punishing their own people. We have to recognize the regional nature of this and also, potentially, the long-term nature of this. We need a strategy of which we can be proud.

We are not doing as well as we could. We are not doing as well as we should. We are not doing as well as we have done in the past and we are not doing as well as we should be doing in the present. However, I still appreciate the opportunity to participate in the debate and look forward to the questions and comments from my colleagues.

● (2045)

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I thank the interim leader of the Liberal Party for his speech and his acknowledgment that this debate is happening tonight because the Prime Minister took the opportunity to reach out to the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the third party to build a broad consensus of Canadians and parliamentarians about what Canada ought to be contributing in Mali.

I have to say I am a little surprised by what I am hearing. It is unusual. If most people listening to this debate heard the hawkish comments coming from across the aisle about whacking the enemy, they would think it was coming from this side of the House. It is actually coming from over there, which I find interesting.

I do not know where the call is coming from to have Canadian troops in Africa. In fact, right now Canada is doing the same thing as the British and the Germans. We are supplying heavy lift transport aircraft to our allies, the French, who have a long-term interest and experience in the region. They have bases in the region. They are fighting a very successful mission. They pushed the rebels out of the cities. As far as we know, it is going very well. There is no need at this point for Canada to send its troops to Africa. We are doing what they are asking us to do. If and when they ask us to do something more, we will certainly consider it.

● (2050)

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Mr. Chair, the parliamentary secretary is saying that to say we need to whack them back is hawkish, but to support the French, who are whacking them back, is what? Baby hawkish, sparrow light, hawk light? What is the hon. member talking about? It is ridiculous.

**Some hon. members:** Oh, oh!

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Mr. Chair, my friends in the New Democratic Party are also supporting what the French are doing. My friends in the New Democratic Party are also taking the position that we should not just say we will give them a plane for a week, or maybe give it to them for two weeks. We are saying if our allies need a plane, we are there to support them. If they need training, we are there to support them. If the United Nations African-led mission needs support, we are there to support them.

The parliamentary secretary says Canada is doing the same as the Germans and the British. The British and the Germans are supporting the United Nations force. They are giving money to the United Nations for the work they are doing. We are not doing that. We are giving \$13 million in humanitarian aid out of a package of \$65 million, which has already been frozen.

On the question of democratic development, let me say this. It is a subject about which I care quite a bit. Canada is the only country now in the OECD that does not have a comprehensive program for democratic development around the world. The Europeans have established an enormous endowment to fund their work in support of democracy. The Americans have had it for a generation. We developed it with Rights & Democracy and then the Conservatives blew it up. Canada needs a strategy for democratic development.

Let me say to the parliamentary secretary, where is Canada going to be in support of the election process? That is where we need to be. That is what we need to be doing.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP):** Mr. Chair, the member for Toronto Centre raised some good points, but I think we need to dig a little deeper.

*Government Orders*

What is going on in Mali was foreseeable. When NATO intervened in Libya, everyone fled to Mauritania, Algeria and, primarily, Mali. That is why this crisis has exploded in Mali. A strategy is needed to avoid having the same thing happen in Mali and having everyone to flee to Niger. That would be dangerous, because there is uranium in Niger and Mauritania.

There is no military strategy, and the country has never had one. Intervention is done on an as-needed basis. It is as though the government finds out about conflicts in the newspaper like everyone else. Something is not working. I would like to hear what my colleague has to say about that.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Mr. Chair, I will do my best but I do not really have enough time to answer the question.

I agree with my colleague when he said that these things are related. That was the first point that I wanted to get across at the beginning of my speech. We cannot look at these situations as being completely isolated from the reality of the region and more distant realities.

There are repercussions on the situation in Algeria, the situation in Libya and the situation throughout the region. We therefore have to develop a strategy that recognizes that there is a security problem, a military problem, a development problem, a democracy problem and a prosperity problem. These problems are all related.

At the end of the day, Canada must not exaggerate what it can do, but it must also not diminish the role that it can play, as my colleague Senator Dallaire said yesterday evening on the CBC. He clearly said that we need a humanitarian strategy in order to help enforce international laws anywhere in the world, particularly where we are aware of security risks.

We have seen it. The French are going into big cities and have had some amount of success. However, we have to learn how guerrilla warfare works. We have to understand that people will go into the mountains and into rural areas but that they will still be there. They will not disappear. They will cross international borders. That is why we need a regional, military, political and economic strategy.

• (2055)

[English]

**Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, Major-General Vance was asked at the committee meeting last week what Canada's military goal was. After some hesitation, he said essentially that our military goal is to support France. He was not able to state what our military goal is and so by default it appears that our military goal is France's military goal and France's military goals are ours.

Similarly, Canada has been asked to support the African-led initiative pursuant to a UN resolution, but we have not responded. Therefore, we are in this situation of adopting another nation's military goals and not responding to the United Nations' request for funding for AFISMA.

I would be interested in the hon. member's comments.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Mr. Chair, my disagreement so far with the government is that I think it is too reluctant to recognize that once the French initiative takes on its leadership role and does what it has

to do, clearly the next plan is to transfer as much responsibility as we can to the African-led force and the UN-led force.

Also, this is not the only region in Africa that faces a tremendous crisis in security. Congo, East Africa and the entire hub down from Sudan right through to Tanzania is an area of conflict and great violence where the UN has been involved. However, Canada has not been engaged, not even financially, in a sufficient way in terms of training and having a strategy.

We live in a world where we need a strategy for every region. We need a strategy for international organizations that are also trying to do the job. That is the approach we need to take, not one where we ask how little we can get away with or how much rhetoric we can use to denounce violence and extremism, which are things that the Conservative government is excellent at.

I would imagine the Minister of Foreign Affairs has put out more press releases in the last two years than any minister of foreign affairs in the history of western civilization. However, that is not the question. I congratulate him for it. John Kennedy once wrote a book called *Profiles in Courage*. The minister shows a whole lot more profile than he does courage, when it comes to saying where we are actually going to get the things done that we need to do.

It requires a greater understanding of working within the framework of the UN and the African Union, being supportive and looking at training. It requires having a strategy that is military, security-based, democracy-based and one that is not afraid to talk about prosperity and the economy. All those things have to be part of the broad strategy.

**Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I thank the House for the opportunity to discuss our support for the people of Mali during this troubled period in their country's history.

Before I tell the House about Canada's response to help those affected by the crisis in Mali and the wider Sahel region, I want to explain why Canada's development and humanitarian work is important to Canadians.

Canada is a compassionate neighbour. When there is a need, Canada responds. We are ready to lend a hand to help those in need. Freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law are Canadian values. These values drive our government's engagement in the international community. These values are the keys to help struggling nations reach their full potential.

When a drought leads to famine and widespread human suffering, we respond, as we did in the Horn of Africa in 2011 and the Sahel region of Africa last year. When a conflict and instability scatter communities and endanger lives, we respond, as we are doing in Mali right now. We do this by delivering lifesaving assistance in the quickest, most efficient way possible, providing food, shelter and medical support to the most vulnerable.

*Government Orders*

In 2010-2011 alone, the Canadian International Development Agency responded to 40 natural disasters in the developing world and answered 68 calls for help in Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Middle East.

When we help countries stabilize and secure their societies, we help prevent violence and criminal activity from spilling over Canadian shores. When we help countries practice good governance, we advance freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Mali is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. It ranked 175th out of 187 countries in terms of human development in 2011. In practical terms, that means just over half of the population lives on less than \$1.25 a day. Mali's infant and maternal mortality, disease and malnutrition rates are significant. Nearly three-quarters of the country's citizens can neither read nor write.

Despite such challenges, prior to the coup Mali was a positive example of democracy in the region for more than 20 years. It had a vision for how to reduce poverty and develop the country. Up until the coup it was putting that plan into action.

In recognition of these efforts, CIDA selected Mali as a country of focus in 2009. Over the years CIDA's projects in Mali, aimed at reducing poverty, improving the health of women and children and increasing access to education, have all achieved considerable success.

In 2010, CIDA helped to provide primary students with more than 1.2 million new textbooks. The textbook industry in Mali, which our assistance helped to establish, saved the ministry of education about \$850,000 by repairing and extending the lifetime of textbooks.

Between 2007 and 2010, Canada's contributions to saving the lives of women and children in Mali helped to increase the rate of assisted childbirths by 2%. Two percentage points may not sound like much, but to all of those mothers who survived a difficult labour and gave birth to a healthy baby, those two percentage points were the difference between life and death.

During this same period 92% of children under the age of one were vaccinated for five childhood diseases.

This is why it is so troubling to witness the deterioration of security and stability in Mali. It is the consequence of terrorist networks seeking ripe opportunities to exploit the most vulnerable.

The establishment of a safe haven for terrorist groups in this region is a threat to the broader international community. As the Prime Minister noted on January 8, "The development of essentially an entire terrorist region in the middle of Africa is of great concern to everybody in the international community".

As members know, Canada suspended its government-to-government assistance to Mali after the coup. However, to be clear, Canada is still very much engaged in helping the people of Mali during this uncertain time. CIDA continues to help those in need through NGOs and multilateral organizations by supporting education, health care and working with farmers to reduce food insecurity.

● (2100)

Where security permits and access has been possible, we have continued to deliver humanitarian assistance through our international partners, who are all working hard to meet the most pressing needs of Mali's most vulnerable people, particularly women and children. We call on all parties to provide full access so that humanitarian needs and the safety and protection of humanitarian workers can be addressed.

Humanitarian agencies report that an estimated two million Malians are food insecure or are at risk of food insecurity. More than 385,000 people have been displaced by this conflict, including more than 236,000 within Mali itself, and another 153,000 who have sought refuge in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania. Our partners on the ground tell us that refugees have arrived in these neighbouring countries exhausted, hungry and in need of basic services such as shelter, medical care, food and water.

Through Canada's support, emergency food and nutrition assistance have been provided to an estimated 1.3 million people throughout Mali, as well as refugees in neighbouring areas. Our assistance is also helping 3,000 vulnerable households access food and other basic necessities through cash transfer and cash-for-work initiatives. Our assistance has helped more than 39,000 Malian children gain treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

Canada is also providing support to ensure that Malian refugees receive essential items such as blankets, kitchen sets, shelter and sanitary supplies. Our support has allowed the international Red Cross movement to distribute essential household items and hygiene kits as well as food to an estimated 600,000 people affected by the conflict. This assistance is on top of the Government of Canada's matching funding for the Sahel crisis.

This matching funding addressed the overall food and nutrition problems in the Sahel region, and the people of Mali receive lifesaving assistance as part of the initiative. Between August 7 and September 30, individual Canadians donated more than \$6.9 million to help people in the Sahel. Our government complemented this generosity dollar for dollar.

Last week, at the donors pledging conference in Ethiopia, the Minister of International Cooperation announced that Canada is providing an additional \$13 million for a number of initiatives aimed at addressing pressing humanitarian needs. We are closely monitoring the situation and responding to the needs of vulnerable Malians as they arise, particularly for women and children.

Development assistance delivered through multilateral organizations and non-governmental organizations is helping to ensure that critical services continue to be available in southern Mali. This type of support is critical to avoiding social unrest in the south and to stabilizing the country. A stable south means more efforts can be concentrated on the security situation in the north.

*Government Orders*

While the conflict persists, our government will work hard to protect Mali's hard-won development gains, while doing everything we can to meet the country's immediate humanitarian needs and contribute to maintaining social stability in the south.

Our response reflects Canadian values. These values guide our very way of life and have earned us our exemplary global reputation for freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Canada will continue to do right for those in need.

● (2105)

**Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP):** Mr. Chair, the parliamentary secretary mentioned a number of important things the government is doing, and also intending to do. Everyone who sees what is happening in Mali and the region understands that a long-term commitment is required. The government has said on many occasions that it has committed more than \$100 million over the last couple of years to Mali. That is fine, but there seems to be a lack of a strategy for the region.

As we have said before on this side of the House, to actually make a difference in the region we must have long-term commitments from Canada that are seen by everyone as predictable. However, we have seen cuts to our countries of focus in Africa and decided to withdraw some of our other assets from Africa.

Would the member agree that this comes at a cost? If she does not, where does she see us going in Africa if we have a regional crisis like we have in Mali? In this regard, she mentioned the food crisis. That is something that does not go away overnight.

I do not understand how the government can say on the one hand that it intend to do all of these great things, but on the other hand withdraw resources. If we are withdrawing resources, does the member or the government not understand that it undermines not only our capacity but also our credibility?

**Ms. Lois Brown:** Mr. Chair, we have not reduced our funding to Africa. In fact, our government has doubled Canada's support to Africa. Most importantly, we have untied our aid to Africa, giving them far more freedom to make choices in how they can access the food and products they need at a better cost. Let us be very clear on that point, first of all.

When we look at the regional issues, before the Sahel drought even started, Canada was aware that a situation was developing. We were there with \$42 million to help preempt the situation we saw happening in the Horn of Africa the year before, to ensure that food security would be taken care of and to put some long-term planning in place so that those things would not happen.

The coup and the conflict in Mali were unforeseen by anyone. However, we are there, helping the Malian people with humanitarian aid right now. We have been there in the past with \$110 million, year over year, that Canada has contributed to help Mali be a country that is growing and developing good governance.

One of the things that Canada—

● (2110)

**The Assistant Deputy Chair:** Order. Hon. member, we appreciate that, but we need to move on with other questions and comments.

We appreciate that hon. members all want to participate, and I would ask hon. members to keep their comments and responses to around a minute or so, if they can.

Questions and comments.

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I want to see if I can get more precision on the numbers that we hearing.

I heard that Canada's annual contribution to Mali was \$90 million, but now I hear it is \$110 million. It was frozen after the coup.

First, how much of that has not been spent? If it is not spent this fiscal year, what will happen to it?

Second, with respect to the \$13 million that was announced by the Minister of International Cooperation last Tuesday in Addis Ababa at the UN-convened meeting, does it come from that pool of money, or is it fresh money coming from somewhere else? If so, where?

To get a precise picture of the aid that is being given, I would appreciate it if we could get some precision on those numbers.

**Ms. Lois Brown:** Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for that question. We were actually in Africa together two weeks ago. We have been in West Africa on previous Canada-Africa Parliamentary Association trips and have seen some of the issues as they have unfolded.

To answer the member's question, Canada has been contributing \$110 million per year to Mali. That money is frozen at the moment because we are not going to give that money to an unelected government. We will wait until the elections take place, and then we will reconsider how we will go forward with that pool of money.

The \$13 million that was announced in Addis Ababa last week by the Minister of International Cooperation is indeed new money that CIDA is contributing to humanitarian aid.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I have two quick questions.

My first question relates to some remarks the parliamentary secretary just made. In committee, witnesses from CIDA told us that, even though the Mali government was not receiving any more direct support, most of that money had been redirected to grassroots non-governmental organizations. The parliamentary secretary seems to be saying something totally different. I would like some clarifications.

Also, will the parliamentary secretary admit that the last budget slashed CIDA's funding by \$377 millions, and that these cuts mostly affect African countries?



*Government Orders*

[English]

**Ms. Lois Brown:** Mr. Chair, I am happy to repeat that we have actually doubled our aid to Africa. The money that is going into Africa today far exceeds that from any previous government in Canada. Doubling that money is only one component.

The second, as I already said in a previous answer, is that we have untied our aid to Africa. That gives freedom to African countries to make use of that money to buy the products they need, perhaps food or pharmaceuticals. They are able to access those products at far better prices from other places in the world. Therefore, untying our aid has given great freedom to Africa to benefit far more from the money we are contributing.

• (2115)

**Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP):** Mr. Chair, this has been a very important debate and will continue to be for some more hours.

I want to ask my hon. colleague this. There is something in the history of how these rebel forces in Mali got hold of so many weapons, and the trail seems to lead to Libya, where some of the people whom we supported in the effort to get rid of Colonel Gadhafi opened up warehouses and shipped large amounts of weapons to al-Qaeda forces. Some of the people we supported in Libya were in fact themselves previous al-Qaeda fighters.

How do we learn from this? How do we ensure that in future when we enact, under the responsibility to protect, the need to go in to protect the civilian population, we do not inadvertently side with people who are prepared to turn warehouses full of weapons into a flow of arms to terrorists who will of course allow conflict to spill into areas that had previously been peaceful?

**Ms. Lois Brown:** Mr. Chair, what we have heard from officials is the suspicion that many of the weapons left long before the conflict in Libya even started or was finished.

I would like to quote the Leader of the Opposition, though, who actually said on January 15 on *CBC Power and Politics*:

I don't see the link necessarily between our intervention in Libya, which was a UN mandate directly to NATO based on the UN charter, protection of civilians who were being attacked by their own government. It's too indirect.

What he is trying to allege as a link to Mali would judge Mali on its merits and look at information put on table if need be, so we are not sure there is a link there.

**Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I wanted to pursue the aid to Mali, and I take the hon. parliamentary secretary at her word when she says, roughly, it is \$110 million, of which the government portion, the money that was directed to the government, and I would understand that to be about 40% of that money, has been frozen. The balance, however, has not been frozen, and that has been distributed to NGOs working on the ground.

The question really is: Did the \$13 million that the minister announced last week come out of that frozen money and has simply been in effect reprofiled from government-directed money to NGO-directed money?

**Ms. Lois Brown:** Mr. Chair, I do not think the opposition likes to take no for an answer, or yes for an answer for that matter.

The \$13 million is new money. The minister announced that money in Addis Ababa. It is new money.

It is the government-to-government direct money that has been suspended. We are still working with our NGOs, humanitarian partners, multilateral partners on the ground, and will continue to do so.

[Translation]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I am very pleased to have the opportunity to discuss today the very serious situation that has developed in Mali.

I hope you will not mind if I share a personal experience. I have been to Mali several times, mainly to work with our Malian colleagues, the representatives of civil society, as part of the Forum on Human Security. Mali was part of the Forum, and Canada was an active member at the time. I met extraordinary people who were working very hard to build a better Mali, a Mali for all, a safe Mali. In light of recent events, I cannot help but think of them, their families and all Malians of course.

In recent days and weeks, there have been fairly positive developments. French forces and the forces of the African Union—mainly from Chad in recent days—are making progress. That is good news for two reasons: first, we can see the progress that is being made, and the African Union is helping. That is key.

• (2120)

[English]

When talking about the African Union's efforts, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs said a few minutes ago that it should be African-led. I am sorry. Maybe it is my misunderstanding of the English language, but I do not think that African-led means Africa alone. It can mean African-led but with our support. Therefore, I do not think that arguing African-led is reason enough to say that we would not support this effort through the various means available to us, as other countries have done. I am thinking of the U.S., which gave \$96 million to AFISMA. The EU gave \$67 million and Germany gave \$20 million. The African Union itself gave \$50 million to AFISMA, on top of the contribution from its member countries in time and money. Canada has given nothing.

Let us move away from the military side, especially as this is not only a military issue.

[Translation]

There are political, social, humanitarian and development issues associated with this situation. I will talk a little about the humanitarian aspect because that is the most urgent.

We are talking about 390,000 people who have been displaced within Mali and to neighbouring countries. We know that neighbouring countries are already in the middle of a terrible food crisis. We have to be there, we have to help these people and the organizations that are on the ground.

*Government Orders*

The government was pleased to announce a Canadian contribution of \$13 million. That is a step in the right direction, and the projects funded by this contribution are beneficial, but we have to admit that it is not very much. By comparison, Japan has provided 10 times as much, or \$120 million in humanitarian aid even though it is experiencing serious financial difficulties as a result of the tsunami. Unlike Canada, it does not have historic ties with Mali. Canada's contribution seems rather paltry by comparison.

The humanitarian situation is a short-term issue. We must help those in need and look ahead to the future. We need to look at the long term and ensure that this does not happen again, in Mali or in the other countries in the region. That requires development as well as social and political dialogue in Mali and the other countries in the region.

We must help these countries build democracies that create opportunities for everyone. And Canada can play a unique role in that. As I said, we have historic ties with Mali and a number of countries in the region, through our francophone population, our shared language and our expertise in democratic development in the traditional sense. But we are far removed from Africa. No matter what the members opposite say, we are far removed. Our presence is being felt less and less in the region, and this is a regional issue.

Cuts to CIDA have reached \$377 million, and this is having a disproportionate impact on African countries. Embassies are closing. For example, we are pulling out of Niger, a potentially problematic country that borders Mali and that we should stand beside.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs is telling us that it is not a big deal because we have embassies in Dakar, Abidjan and so on. When I hear that, it makes me wonder if people think that Africa is the size of Portugal or Greece. But Africa is huge.

In Dakar, I was responsible for five countries. I am not afraid of hard work, but I had as much work as I could handle. I do not see how someone in Dakar or someone who is involved in the current situation on the Ivory Coast can also cover Niger and another country such as South Africa even, or Malawi and why not a few other Latin American countries while we are at it.

This lack of coverage prevents us from having people on the ground who are closely monitoring the situation. Clearly, the work people do on the ground does not produce quantifiable results. However, it gives us a presence. It allows us to show that we are partners, and it helps us to understand the situation. That is absolutely essential.

On one hand, we are moving away from Africa but on the other, we are unfortunately moving away from a sector in which we have exceptional expertise, for which we were known and which formed part of Canada's brand—if I can call it that—as a promoter of democracy.

I have heard my colleagues say that we will support a democratic Mali. However, it is not enough to support a democratic Mali or to say that we want Mali to be a democratic country and hope that it happens with the wave of a magic wand. We also have to lend a hand.

Great Britain is providing \$3.1 million to support the political process. And what are we doing? We are waiting on the sidelines, waiting and watching and becoming more and more insignificant, a partner that does not count. This is preventing us from influencing events as we would like.

I would like to close with a plea for Canada to once again invest in democratic development. Why was the institute for democratic development that was promised by the Conservatives in the 2008 Speech from the Throne never set up? Why did they destroy organizations such as Rights and Democracy, which had a quarter of a century of expertise?

Instead of just saying we support Mali, Canada should really be there and really help the people of Mali.

• (2125)

[*English*]

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, my friends in the NDP seem to be a little confused. They have said many times tonight that Canada closed its diplomatic mission, its embassy, in Niger. We did not do that. Canada did not have an embassy in Niger. It never did have an embassy there. What it had was a CIDA office. Niger is covered from Bamako, Mali. It was then and it is now. There has been no change.

They keep saying that Canada is reducing its contributions to Africa. That is not true. Canada has doubled its contributions to Africa since the levels of 2003-04 under the former Liberal government.

My friend asks what Canada is doing with respect to AFISMA. First, the building that AFISMA is operating out of was built largely with Canadian money. There would not be an AFISMA headquarters if it were not for the support of the Canadian government and the Canadian taxpayer.

The members want to know why Japan is putting in \$100 million in and Canada is putting in, most recently, \$13 million.

Canada has been contributing to Mali since 1960, not Japan. Canada has been putting in \$110 million each and every year for many years. Most of that money, as we have discussed tonight, is continuing. It is only the money that was going directly to the government of Mali, which has been frozen because that government currently is not a democratically-elected government.

Canada is one of the largest donor countries in Mali. It has been before and it continues to be today.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Lavergère:** Mr. Chair, I would like to make a few very brief comments.

*Government Orders*

Basically, we are taking people off the ground. Yet we need people, human beings, to be there, people who are involved, engaging in dialogue, and who can observe and report on the situation and influence events. But those resources are being cut off. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs is also telling us that the Conservatives have not reduced funding to Africa. It is too bad that it is not my turn to ask him a question, because he could go back and look at the numbers in the latest budgets and note that CIDA's budget has been frozen for years and that significant cuts were made in the last budget. If he were to look at where these cuts have been made, he would see that they have been made primarily at the expense of African countries.

I am very pleased to learn that a building built largely with Canadian money is being used by AFISMA, but this kind of retroactive support for this African effort really leaves me perplexed. I will say no more, for I wish to remain courteous.

As for Japan, indeed, it was not a major contributor in Mali. Japan contributes a great deal to international co-operation. Mali does not have any particular historical ties to Japan, but nevertheless, Japan still gave \$120 million, while Canada gave a measly \$13 million.

● (2130)

**Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I congratulate my colleague on her excellent speech. I am pleased to congratulate one of my NDP colleagues, since I have not been too kind to them this week. But I was very happy to hear such an excellent speech.

My question has to do with the government's attitude, as expressed by the parliamentary secretary, who said that, since we have given a lot to Mali in the past, we do not need to give them more now. What is going on now? The country is experiencing a major crisis and it has been crippled by a horrible terrorist attack. And the government is saying that we will give only \$13 million, because we have given a lot in the past. What kind of reasoning is that?

How can the government distance itself from a country we have invested so much in, a country with which we have many ties and that is a member of La Francophonie? How does it look when we give \$13 million and refuse to work with the UN? How does that policy look?

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière:** Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for his excellent question. I would like to respond with a metaphor.

Imagine that we had invited people over to eat a number of times and we felt that we had a good and supportive friendship with them. Then one day, their house burns down and we give them three carrots, saying that we already fed them three months ago. That is unimaginable. We did things in the past. Now there is a crisis and we are sitting on the sidelines doing nothing. That is disturbing.

It is even more disturbing that Canada is not showing solidarity and support for a country in need that is experiencing crisis after crisis, and also that our international reputation and influence are losing ground.

**Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I would like to take advantage of the fact that my colleague has the floor to ask her to talk some more about Rights and Democracy.

For 20-odd years, Mali was an example of democracy for neighbouring African countries. This government's band-aid solution of simply throwing money at the situation is not really a long-term solution, and it clearly demonstrates the government's unwillingness to take long-term action in a region that is so crippled by humanitarian crises.

How can Canada play the role that it has always played—or, rather, that it played until the Conservatives came to power—and bring democracy back to Mali so it can once again become an example for so many African countries?

● (2135)

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière:** Mr. Chair, yes, Mali has had difficulties and crises. It is also a country where the people have often taken charge of their own fate and tried to hold national consultations. But this country faces tremendous challenges. It is a large and extremely poor country with a deep divide between the north and the south. It is very complex. And that is the key point because not only is there is a lack of will, but I get the impression that there is also a lack of understanding.

I will go beyond the member's question and not speak exclusively about Mali. If we invest in promoting democratic institutions, we can often prevent or minimize conflicts. A small investment in an organization such as Rights and Democracy, which was internationally recognized, paid significant dividends in preventing these conflicts, social issues and security issues. And these security issues could potentially affect all of us. They need to be prevented.

Whether we are talking about foreign affairs, international co-operation or some other issue, this government does not seem to understand the concept of prevention.

[English]

**Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, given that whenever the government announces new money, we pretty well need to have the PBO, the AG and KPMG certify that it is in fact new money. Also given that the CIDA budget has been on a steady state of decline from about \$5 billion to \$3.5 billion now and given that the minister has to my knowledge not received an order-in-council that this is fresh money, it therefore follows the new money that has been announced is not actually new money, that it has come from somewhere. I suggested to the parliamentary secretary that it was actually coming out of the frozen money that was held back from the current government in Mali.

When the parliamentary secretary says this is new money, does the hon. member believe her?

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière:** Mr. Chair, it really depends on how we define new money. I do not think that any money has been added to CIDA's budget to do that. My understanding from CIDA's official briefing is that this money comes from the humanitarian fund within CIDA. Therefore, it is an envelope of money which is there waiting and the minister can take money in that pool. No money has been added to the CIDA budget to my understanding for the \$13 million.

*Government Orders*

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Chair, it is an honour to be part of tonight's debate. We on this side are all delighted that it is happening at this time, so soon after the international community has seen some success in its efforts to support Mali in restoring legitimacy to the authority of a government over all of its territory, and particularly in the north.

I would like to touch on two aspects of the crisis Mali is facing. First is the root of the matter, how we got here, the back story, who is a threat to Mali and through Mali, to all of us. Second is the question of the military imperative that is now being met, in part by French forces in support of Malian forces, and increasingly by African forces, which all along wanted to take the principal role and were authorized to take the principal role under last December's U.N. resolution. They are filling in behind French forces as progress continues.

On the root of the matter, it is important to go back some time to remind ourselves just where these terrorist extremists organizations that finally ended up in northern Mali came from. The story begins with a once upon a time, almost, recollection that one now needs to reach back toward in 1988.

Once upon a time there was a rabble rouser, an extremist called Osama bin Laden, who brought a group of friends together in Peshawar, Pakistan in the summer of 1988. Some hon. members here were not even born then. He decided that contributing to jihad in Afghanistan was not enough, that he was going to find an organization that would go to Kashmir, that would go anywhere in the world, that would attack not just the Soviet Union, but the United States. He called it al-Qaeda. He spent five years at that time in Pakistan.

We will recall that soon thereafter he felt the call to go back to Saudi Arabia. He was in Saudi Arabia for three years. He offered the services of al-Qaeda to the Saudi government to attack Saddam Hussein at that time. Of course, he was declined. He was actually banished from Saudi Arabia. He went on to Sudan for four years where he hatched other plots. He tried to kill President Mubarek of Egypt and eventually got the call to go back to Afghanistan, which was now under Taliban rule in 1996. There, even larger plots were hatched: Nairobi, Dar es Salaam and the *USS Cole* in Yemen.

I mention this story because all of these places are part of the regional equation which the interim leader of the Liberal party and all of us understand has to be taken into account when we talk about Mali, because it is part of a jigsaw puzzle. It is part of a global effort in which Canada has played a central role, to bring a non-governmental threat to heel, to empower governments to stand against the kind of threat that Mali has faced now since 2010 from al-Qaeda.

Displaced from all of these other places, al-Qaeda was on the ropes in most of these other places, even in Somalia and Yemen, and was forced to seek refuge in the wastes in some of the least hospitable areas of the world, the Sahel and the Sahara itself in northern Mali. All of us working together under a level of co-operation, with the full backing of the United Nations, which is unparalleled, certainly since the second world war, have succeeded in preventing al-Qaeda from finding a host. We have prevented it

from taking over the whole state in some other part of the world, as it has tried to do in Afghanistan, as it would dearly love to do in Pakistan and as it has tried to do in other parts of the world over this 25-year-old saga.

• (2140)

Osama bin Laden is at the heart of the story. Obviously he has not been with us, as members will recall, since the day before we were elected to this place. Thank goodness, but that is another story. However, some of his last orders, as we now know from documents recovered in Abbottabad, were to re-establish outposts of his empire in places such as Yemen, Somalia and the Maghreb.

That is why al-Qaeda in the Maghreb is one of the big affiliates of the al-Qaeda organization and one of the few that, up until recently, did not face the kind of military pressure or security response that even Yemen and Somalia, with help from other African neighbours, have been able to offer. That is why we are talking about a threat to two-thirds of Mali. That is why we are talking about a coup in the spring of last year. It is not because al-Qaeda was threatening to take over the whole country but because of the army. Some of its most disciplined units in Mali, which had been trained in part by Canada, were unhappy that their government was not taking action and was not ordering them into battle in the north to deal with this problem.

They went too far and made what we think was the wrong political decision. They overthrew a democratically elected government. In fact, the Canadian-trained units, from the information we have, were not part of that unfortunate series of events. However, the legitimacy was sapped out of the Malian government. Its authority was further eroded and al-Qaeda took control, not alone, but with several other groups, Ansar Dine, Tuareg groups, that had tilted their way, seeing how strong they were in Timbuktu and elsewhere. The world looked on with consternation and became increasingly concerned as UNESCO World Heritage sites, Islamic treasures and mausoleums of moderate enlightened Sufi saints were destroyed by these butchers who were very happy to put people to death in summary trial but also to destroy the legacy and heritage of all humanity.

Canada's voice was raised by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and others on this side of the House. We were concerned but we were not yet able to take action because there was no consensus in the African Union, in ECOWAS or the United Nations to authorize that action. Therefore, the resolution that came forward in December was truly unprecedented. We have not seen that level of explicit authorization for combat operations, African-led but supported by the whole international community and the whole machinery of the United Nations, for many other conflicts. Certainly none of this would have happened until that resolution was passed in December.

*Government Orders*

Today, with the resolution in hand, we find that Mali faces three crises. One is a political crisis, which we hope will now be addressed with the road map and the path toward elections, and Canada applauds that. The second is a humanitarian crisis, which my colleagues, the other parliamentary secretaries, addressed and in which we have invested by building on a foundation of very generous investment and contribution over years, even decades, in good times and bad in Mali. However, the military crisis remains. There has been progress, as members on the other side have acknowledged. The largest population centres in the north are now back in government hands. The Tuareg are leaning the government's way once again as al-Qaeda pulls out of the cities and withdraws into the mountains and other difficult to reach places.

However, what will they do? Who will reach out and touch them there? What will the capacity of the Malian government be to bring them to justice? We still do not know. Much depends on investments to come and much depends on the AFISMA mission. It has a complex demanding mission, to contribute to building Malian defensive security forces and support national authorities in recovering areas in the north under the control of terrorists and extremist groups. That means combat if necessary. As well, it is to help stabilize the country and consolidate state authority, support authorities in protecting the population, contribute to a secure environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and the return of displaced populations, protect personnel and the mission, and it has only be authorized for one year.

• (2145)

[*Translation*]

At the request of the Malian government and in accordance with the mandate of resolution 2085, France launched a military operation on January 11.

Canada joined the international community in supporting this initiative instigated by France in order to act quickly and put an end to these attacks by Islamist groups.

Let us be clear: France acted as an African power, a country that has military resources based in Africa. The only forces that France has sent into the theatre in any African countries so far were already based in Africa.

The United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and Canada have not sent troops into combat, because we did not have the necessary resources on the ground in Africa. It is a very simple explanation.

Our support to our ally, France, is very much appreciated. We have—

[*English*]

**The Assistant Deputy Chair:** Order, please. We have reached the end of the time allocated for this intervention.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I congratulate my colleague on the government side.

What he said is backed by research. There are many interesting facts. He definitely has a broad perspective of the situation, a perspective that is quite interesting.

He recognizes that Osama Bin Laden is no longer with us. We can all agree on that.

Perhaps we should start talking about Canada's involvement, what we in Canada have done so far, and about how our interest in Mali could be expressed.

The \$13 million that we have offered so far seems very limited to me. We could do much better than that. We have close relations with Mali. We know a lot of people there. We have companies operating in Mali, and we have a lot of interests.

So far, the Conservative government does not seem to know what to do about Mali, how we could intervene and what we could do.

The member is obviously quite knowledgeable, but he did not talk about the guiding principles behind Canada's interventions in Mali. What is the purpose? Does Canada want to provide aid? Is it expected to follow the advice of other states or has it found its own way of intervening? What exactly is it responding to?

I would rather like to hear things like "we have a specific action plan for Mali".

What are we specifically trying to do in Mali, and what kind of resources will we invest? Are we going to provide more than \$13 million? Frankly, that is not enough.

• (2150)

**Mr. Chris Alexander:** Mr. Chair, of course we want to continue to invest. Of course we have invested more than the members opposite recognize or have chosen to recognize in this debate.

Up until 2010-11, Mali was the only country to receive such a large amount, \$110 million a year, with the exception of perhaps two other countries: Afghanistan and Haiti. These two, three or four countries were at the top of our list in terms of our obligations for development.

Development is not something that happens overnight. It is certainly not something that can be facilitated with a government that results from a coup and lacks political legitimacy. We decided to suspend our development assistance.

I ask my colleague to name another country that has been as generous as Canada, on a per capita basis, when it comes to humanitarian assistance over the past year regarding the crisis in Mali and the entire Sahel region.

In terms of security, we continue to monitor the overall situation. We have a small group that is training armed forces in Niger. We want to facilitate participation in operation Flintlock in Mauritania, which is important in the region.

We have also made considerable investments in training the Malian army. We are no longer doing so, because that army is at war —

*Government Orders*

[English]

**The Assistant Deputy Chair:** Order, please. I would remind hon. members that we have a 10-minute question and comment period. I would also remind the many hon. members I see standing to participate in the debate that they keep their comments, questions and responses to around a minute or so. It works well and more members will be able to participate.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood.

**Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I appreciate the hon. member's attempt to position this conflict in a wider sphere. Had he had more time, I am sure he would have gone back to the Muslim Brotherhood and the decision of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian jails to take jihad outside of Muslim lands, which is the actual origins of Osama bin Laden and that entire crew.

Therefore, the member agrees with us, I believe, that the first and foremost military goal here must be the containment and degradation of the Islamic threat, the jihad, the al-Qaeda threat. Therefore, he would also agree, as we do, that the French are to be supported in their initial efforts. However, what is curious in the government's position, and I would be interested in the hon. member's comments on this, is that the necessary second stage is the support, training and equipping of the African-led force.

Why is it that Canada is not contributing financially to AFISMA? Why has Canada not responded to the unprecedented, mandated call by the UN to equip AFISMA?

• (2155)

**Mr. Chris Alexander:** Mr. Chair, as the member well knows, we have been supporting capacity-building for the African Standby Force, which is part of the African Union, since 2006. That was in line with the G8 commitment, but our contribution was actually larger on a per capita basis. AFISMA will be based on the principles established for the African Standby Force and the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS, Standby Force, in which Canada has also invested, not over years but over decades.

This is important because investments today, through a trust fund or any other means, into AFISMA are not the crucial element. The crucial element is the institutional capacity of ECOWAS, of the AU, and indeed of the Malian army. We have played a role over the long term in investing in those.

Other hon. members have asked if there is a plan. There is a Security Council resolution that is about as explicit as I have ever seen for an operation of this sort. It also points to the Malian authorities, ECOWAS and the AU as the bodies that must articulate the plan. We want to support their plan and indeed France wants to support their plan.

It is not complete. Some of the African forces are very capable. They began deploying in Bamako on January 21. Give them time to spool up, to deploy to the north with the help of many allies, including France, which has the technical airlift capacity inside the country, and we will see what they can do, as they have performed effectively in Sierra Leone, in Liberia and on other ECOWAS missions.

The bottom line is that our investment here is long term, large scale and institutional. When we have had the opportunity to invest, it has taken place in accordance with our democratic principles and to ensure that human rights are upheld and abuses avoided.

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I thank my hon. colleague for his very cogent and well-thought-out speech. He takes us through what is essential history for the region.

The member knows that France was formerly a colonial government in the region, and that the French military has three bases in the region. I wonder if the member could take us through how quickly France responded to the UN resolution and how quickly Canada responded to France's request to assist.

**Mr. Chris Alexander:** Mr. Chair, it is important to note that history matters here, because it helps to explain the extent of the conflict and the crisis, and the number of countries involved. These are places where al-Qaeda, over years, has tried to install itself. Osama bin Laden is dead, thank God. However, al-Qaeda is not yet gone.

One of our goals, which I think we all share in the House, is not just whacking people or organizations. I do not think we use that term in these contexts. It is the destruction, the elimination of al-Qaeda as a threat to Mali, neighbouring countries and the whole world.

France acted quickly. Its troops moved on January 11. France asked us, relatively rapidly, for this heavy transport, strategic transport, strategic lift, because not many countries have this kind of aircraft. We only acquired it recently. Some members opposite did not see this as a priority for Canada at the time, but we did acquire it. It helped us in Haiti and now it is helping us in Mali. We were the first country to have an aircraft on the ground in Bamako serving French forces. I think that is quite a good record.

• (2200)

**Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I am pleased to be able to participate in this debate tonight on the security situation in Mali and Canada's role in it. It is an important debate. It is important that we are having this debate as a Parliament and are talking about executive action in this important region of the world. It is important because we were involved in helping to create a thriving democracy in Mali for some two decades, which has been an independent country for only 50 years. It is also important that there has been some consultation between the leader of the opposition, the Prime Minister and the leader of the Liberal Party to attempt to achieve a consensus as to what Canada should do and a commitment and a stipulation by our leader, the leader of the opposition, that this be brought to Parliament as quickly as possible.

This country has a spotty record of having interventions discussed by Parliament. We are not talking about committing to combat. We are talking about a commitment to military assets, so far, in the case of the use of the C-17.

*Government Orders*

We have had a developing practice, not yet a convention, although I hope we get there, of having parliamentary oversight in a stronger way over international interventions. Chuck Strahl, for example, when he was a Reform MP, actually brought a motion to the House asking for parliamentary approval before troops were put in any overseas operations. It failed. The Liberal government defeated it. Another Reform MP, Bob Mills, made a similar attempt in 1996, which also failed. However, I think at the time there was a recognition, even by the government of the day, that there was a growing sense that Parliament ought to be directly involved. We are keeping up with that tradition tonight in terms of talking about what potential role Canada might play, because we are seeing a changing situation.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs talked about the situation with al-Qaeda. As he mentioned, the situation in Mali has developed over the last year, starting with a coup last March. Some people are asking why we are helping a government that was founded on a military coup. There are two answers. The first is that we are actually attempting to help the people of Mali, as opposed to this particular government of Mali. The second point that needs to be underscored is that almost immediately upon this coup taking place, the international community, and, in particular, the regional community of the African Union and ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, acted immediately to expel Mali from the African Union. They sent delegations there to seek to restore a constitutional government. They received a commitment, in fairly short order, that there would be a transitional government and eventually the development of a road map to the restoration of democracy under the constitution of 1992. That happened as a result of significant pressure at the regional level and the international level with the withdrawal of international support for the coup-led government, which almost immediately made it clear that the government would not be able to actually operate.

We were told by officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs that Mali was recognized by other people engaged in international aid and development as a country that did not use the money given to it by other countries to build up its army. Therefore, it actually had a weak army. It was weak in terms of its strength, but it may also have been weak in terms of its discipline, its record and its ability to properly carry out ethical and moral operations.

● (2205)

We have heard of the abuses and the allegations of abuses. However, the reality is that the army was not strong. Once the coup took place, Mali was a vulnerable state and was exposed to the events that took place. The rebellion in the north was assisted by the Islamist extremists, mainly al-Qaeda in the Maghreb and the other group of Islamist extremists that took part in that, which led quickly to a serious deterioration, which the United Nations Security Council took seriously.

In a series of resolutions, beginning last July, then in October and December, the UN Security Council took strong action to seek the support of the international community to aid the African-led International Support Mission to Mali using African troops, the support of the African Union, and the support of ECOWAS. The United Nations Security Council was acting on its mandate as the

primary body for international peace and security in the world authorizing this action and was seeking the support of other nations.

The timing was interesting, because it was expected that this would take several months, up to next fall, to be ready to carry out the military mission. Events overtook the plans, which often happens. We saw the attempt by the Islamist extremists, seeing a weakness and seeing a delay, to take over the country.

We saw the response to that. France took action. We supported that action. We are now in a situation where a peacekeeping mission in Mali is being contemplated.

As my colleague from Ottawa Centre pointed out, this is something we ought to be monitoring carefully to see what kind of mandate may or may not come from this suggestion. It is obviously premature to be talking about that right now. There is no peace to keep. However, if it comes to the point where there is discussion about that, Canada should be ready to see whether we play a role and what role we might play. We need to consider what might be a substantial UN peacekeeping mission in Mali. We would anticipate this being, again, African-led. It is important to consider what role Canada might play in assisting.

That does not necessarily mean troops. I want to preclude the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs jumping to his feet right after I finish to accuse us of suggesting that. I would encourage him, as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, to read resolution 2086, a new resolution of the Security Council, which was adopted on January 21, 2013. That resolution reiterates the role of the UN in peacekeeping. It spells out, in great detail, the kind of multi-dimensional peacekeeping missions that may be mandated by the Security Council. It is extremely important. All Canadians should have a look at that, because it defines the kinds of roles nations would be asked to play in nation-building and peace-building in nations around the world.

I say that because my colleague, the hon. member for Ottawa Centre, was generous in saying that Canada was the 53rd nation in its contributions to international peacekeeping missions. We are actually the 55th nation, according to the United Nations organization on December 12. While there are some 80,000 troops engaged in peacekeeping around the world, Canada contributes 11 troops and 19 police officers. That is where we are after 35 years of being perhaps the lead nation in assisting in peacekeeping around the world. That is just on the troop side.

● (2210)

Ten enumerated actions may be mandated. They are spelled out in United Nations Security Council resolution 2086. It recognizes that each mandated peacekeeping mission would be specific to the needs and the situation of the country concerned. It is based on some very strong principles, including the consent of the nations involved. The mandate could include a mix of civilian police and military capabilities under a unified leadership. Those are the benefits of the United Nations involvement—

**Mr. Bruce Stanton (Assistant Deputy Chair of Committees of the Whole, CPC):** Order, please.

In fact, we are at the end of the time allocated. We will now go to questions and comments.

*Government Orders*

The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I would point out to my hon. colleague that I rose very gently to my feet to ask him this question.

I listened to his speech, and I am trying very hard to understand what it is exactly the NDP wants the government to do. I am instructed by comments his colleague, the NDP critic for foreign affairs, made on January 8, on the *Power & Politics with Evan Solomon* show, where he said, “We would be very different. This is what the NDP would be doing right now”. That was on January 8, just a few days after the French troops landed in Mali. He said, “First of all, we’d be engaged with peacekeeping, peace-building”.

Evan Solomon said, “So, is it troops on the ground?”

He said, “We would have a conversation with our partners to say ‘what can Canada do?’”

Evan Solomon said again, “but you would consider...”.

The NDP foreign affairs critic replied, “[A]ll options are on the table”.

If they are not considering boots on the ground, Canadian soldiers on the ground in Mali in some way, what exactly did his colleague, the critic for foreign affairs, mean? Perhaps he could explain it to us and enlighten the Canadian people on that point.

**Mr. Jack Harris:** Mr. Chair, I know that there is a bit of baiting going on here tonight by the members opposite in the government. However, I think he has to examine his own understanding of what peace-building and peacekeeping actually mean. If he looks at the various 10 enumerated actions, which I suggest he look at, he will understand that peace-building, building and assisting in strengthening the rule of law and institutions in the host countries, and helping national authorities develop priorities and strategies to address the needs of judicial institutions, police, corrections, et cetera, are some of the mandates listed there.

The fact of the matter is that the experience of peace-building is complex. It is multi-dimensional. It may involve assisting in a circumstance where, once peace has been achieved and we are not engaged in combat, we can provide assistance to have greater security in Mali.

We just talked about the inadequacies of the Malian army in terms of being able to provide security for their country. We were astonished, and I am sure that the parliamentary secretary was astonished, to hear General Ham suggest that the Americans had neglected to provide ethical training when they were assisting in training troops in Africa. I do not think we are guilty of that. I think the training provided by Canada and that can be provided by Canada has a different dimension to it.

There may be ways we can be helpful. We have to first find out if there is going to be any mission of that nature and see what Africa needs.

I know this. When we were asked to provide financial assistance to AFISMA to take over control of the operations, we said no.

**Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, the curious part of this debate is the way in which the government has been tap-dancing away from financing anything to do with AFISMA. Obviously if we were a bit more involved with that initiative, as are other nations to the tune of \$450 million, we might actually be into the second stage of this conflict, if you will, which is the hand-off from the French to the African-led initiative.

One of the disturbing aspects, and in the latter part of the response the hon. member made reference to it: the Malian army and how ethical training is of some concern, because we have learned to our great disappointment that if an army is not ethical, then the whole thing is lost.

I would be interested in the hon. member’s comments with respect to the way in which Canada could be involved in the AFISMA initiative, and particularly with respect to the Malian army, whose casual regard for human rights may in fact be counterproductive to what we all want to see, which is peace, order and a democratic government in Mali.

• (2215)

**Mr. Jack Harris:** Mr. Chair, I do not know how far it got, but one of the notions that was being floated around in the last few weeks was the suggestion, and I think the French were talking about this, of the possibility of UN observers participating in monitoring the situation to ensure respect for human rights as an integral part of any operations that were being undertaken between the Malian troops and the French troops. I do not know whether that is something whose time has come and gone. That is a suggestion that has been made.

Obviously, as the member has pointed out, if we have a situation where there is an army that is seeking to secure the country that we believe should have security, and it is not following human rights principles and rule of international law, then all is lost. That does not provide security to the population, the people of Mali.

As my colleague has pointed out, it is a very complex situation. The exact solution is not in sight at this point, but we do know that the AFISMA organization, which is not primarily obviously Mali forces, is seeking to take a strong role. It will be taking control over this from the French government and it should get all the support it needs, starting, in this instance, with what it asks for, which is financial support, and which so far the government has failed to provide.

Maybe we should take one step at a time and see what the later asks are and see what other efforts come from the—

**The Assistant Deputy Chair:** Order, please. Questions and comments, the hon. member for Ottawa Centre.

**Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP):** Mr. Chair, actually I am quite flattered by the fact that the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs takes such a keen interest in watching me on *Power and Politics*. I will not react to his misquoting, but my colleague did do a good job of explaining the complexities of peacekeeping and peace building. We sincerely hope that the government, and all members and Canadians for that matter, looks at the January 21 explanation of peacekeeping and peace building that was passed and presented at the United Nations.



*Government Orders*

I want to touch on the road map. The government asked for feedback from us. One of the things I think is key when we are looking at the situation is getting Malian democracy back on track. The government says great things about it, but as was noted by my colleague from Quebec, other countries have contributed, Britain to the extent of \$3 million.

Would the hon. member not think it would be a good idea for Canada to contribute to the road map, both in resources and perhaps with human resources as well, because we have some of the best in the world in terms of doing governance and certainly doing democratic development?

**Mr. Jack Harris:** Mr. Chair, it is of primary importance that we provide some assistance. One of the encouraging things we have seen as a result of recent events is that the MNLA, the Tuareg group which was partnered with AQIM, obviously has decided that it made a bad decision and is now seeking to integrate and is willing to enter into negotiations and discussions with the rest of Mali and seek a road map to peace.

That is something in which we do have some expertise, and we ought to be contributing. Unfortunately, as has been pointed out earlier in the debate, Canada is one of the few nations that does not seek to engage in that. Instead we had the Minister of Foreign Affairs engaged in finger wagging. I do not know if that term is any worse than “whacking”. It clearly means that all one is doing is standing up and wagging one's fingers and saying, “You folks should get yourselves to be more democratic”. That is not much help from this distance, I should say to the members opposite. There has to be engagement, and Canada has failed in that, although we do have that capability.

• (2220)

**Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC):** Mr. Chair, as I have been watching the debate all night, I thought I would just make a few observations before I get into my notes on the humanitarian situation. The first one is that the Prime Minister reached out to the opposition. He said this is what is going on in Mali and if the opposition was interested in discussing it further that by all means it could be studied at committee. We have been doing that. We have had one meeting on it so far and we plan to have, I believe, another two or three meetings on this over the next week or so.

I do want to thank the officials who came out to see us and brief us. They were there last Thursday. We had Kerry Buck, who is the political director and assistant deputy minister from the Department of Foreign Affairs. She brought along Patricia Malikail and Lisa Helfand, who is the director.

From the Department of National Defence, we had Major-General Jonathan Vance. I want to thank him.

From the Canadian International Development Agency, we had David Morrison and Leslie Norton. I want to thank them for their briefing last Thursday.

We are going to continue to talk about this situation over the next few days. The Prime Minister reached out to the leaders of the opposition to keep them informed and to offer up any discussion they may want to have in the House.

As I have been listening over the last couple of hours, I realized that not all of this relates to Mali. Some of this relates to some of the things that we are doing as a government that the opposition does not like. I get that. That is what the opposition is there for. The members will challenge the government and the direction.

It was raised that maybe we did not have enough troops on the ground. I heard that coming from the opposition. I heard that maybe we need to spend more money. I guess the challenge will always be whether there is ever enough money that we can spend. If we have troops on the ground, will the question be why we put troops on the ground, when we look at what happened in Afghanistan? It was a war that was not started by us. The Liberals put our troops there, and then when they became opposition, they asked when were we going to bring the troops home.

Once again, we understand that when a party is in government it makes decisions and will be challenged on them. Look at the F-35. It was a process started by the opposition. It was sole sourced and picked by the Liberals as the best plane. Now that they are in opposition, they challenge the government, asking why we chose the F-35. Regardless of what happens, there is always going to be noise coming from the opposite side about what our government is doing.

We have taken a measured approach. What we have done has been great. The opposition talks about maybe not enough money. The last speaker said maybe we could give more money, but I look at what the Canadian government has contributed to the region. It is over \$100 million. We did not just show up in Mali. We have been there for a number of years. Therefore, when we look at how we can help out, whether it is the \$13 million that the Minister of International Cooperation announced, or whether it is the \$18 million in kind that we are contributing for the military strategic airlift, we have been there. We realize there are all kinds of parts. Someone mentioned that the Japanese contributed \$100 million.

These are all great things, but it is important that we be strategic and look at what we are doing, so we are not just saying “me too” there, so that we can pick spots where we have been.

I may comment later, if I have time, on some other things. Someone mentioned the fact that we are looking at trade deals in Africa and asked why that is the case when we should have been looking at some of these other things.

I want to talk a bit about the humanitarian situation and the fact that we are gravely concerned about the current crisis in Mali and the repercussions this is having on the neighbouring countries in the Sahel region. This has been mentioned many times tonight, that it is not just Mali that we are concerned about. We are concerned about the whole region.

Malians living in the north have, over the last year, been subjected to brutal treatment by armed groups and terrorists seeking to impose a very strict form of Sharia, prompting mass displacement. Since the crisis began, over a year ago, more than 385,000 people have been forced to flee their homes. More than 8,000 have fled to neighbouring countries, and many more have been internally displaced. The conflict and the activities of armed groups, terrorists and rebels are making relief efforts more difficult.

*Government Orders*

• (2225)

In order to meet the needs of those affected by the conflict in Mali, it is imperative for the humanitarian workers to have full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access to those in need. Secure access is necessary to provide lifesaving assistance.

Until recently, terrorists, extremists and other armed groups have patrolled nearly two-thirds of Mali's territory. They took advantage of a power vacuum in the capital and occupied the remote villages and Malian Sahara, and terrorized Malian men, women and children.

I would like to detail for hon. members some of our government's activities in building the capacities of local governments to combat terrorism and insecurity in the region.

Canada contributes to counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel by providing training, funding, equipment and infrastructure to developing states. In 2010, our Conservative government devoted new resources specifically to the Sahel. The new fund targets 11 states in the Sahel over 5 years. Mali is one of those states.

I would also note that under Canada's G8 presidency, the Sahel region was identified as a priority region for counter-terrorism and was mentioned specifically in the Muskoka declaration. As chair of the counter-terrorism action group, CTAG, Canada hosted a large multi-stakeholder meeting in Bamako in October 2010, aimed at encouraging greater regional co-operation in the fight against terrorism.

Our government was active and interested in Mali before recent headlines took other parties' attention there. Since 2010, we have provided \$18 million to countries in the Sahel to strengthen their capacity in the key areas of law enforcement, military, and intelligence, and the legal and criminal justice regimes against terrorism.

We co-chaired the Sahel counter-terrorism working group focused on countering violent extremism and supporting better border management. Prior to the coup, we provided Mali with important support for its security forces and worked to strengthen the country's legal regime against terrorism. We expect that a return to democratic rule will see these efforts bear fruit.

The instability brought by the security and the humanitarian crises in northern Mali has an impact on Canadian interests from a security, commercial, democratic, human rights and humanitarian perspective. It is in Canada's interest to contribute to the stabilization of Mali and to support efforts in combatting terrorism. That is to say, northern Mali and the whole Sahel must not become a safe haven for terrorist organizations. Assuring the territorial integrity of a free and democratic Mali is in Canada's interest. Our government stands ready to help a democratic Mali build a better, brighter future for all Malians.

These beliefs are at the core of Canada's foreign policy, one where democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law are invaluable principles. Our government has worked to combat the scourge of terrorism in the Sahel region and will continue to do so.

As we have heard tonight, we have been working there. Despite the talk about money not being delivered, we have been contributing funds to Mali, as I said, of over \$100 million. When the coup against

the government took place, we looked at getting that aid money to organizations on the ground.

We believe it is important in that region. We believe it is important to help the people of Mali and will continue to do so.

• (2230)

**Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague, the chair of the foreign affairs committee, for his work on the committee and his intervention this evening.

We have been talking tonight about the present situation. Some have given an historical perspective along with that. It is clear that everyone agrees that Canada has to play a significant role in the region, and certainly in Mali. The question is how we do that. One of the things that we on this side of the House have mentioned is that it is absolutely critical that Canada support governance in Mali so that Mali can be revitalized as a resilient state. It is a difficult situation because of the grievances of the Tuaregs in the north, which go back to the beginning of Mali, as I am sure my friend knows.

The question is what more can Canada do than it has done? I will put aside my criticisms of the current government and its lack of action in Africa and the region, as I have put those on the record already.

Would the member agree that two things should be done? The first is that we should be contributing to the road map that the government has supported. The second is that the government should live up to its promise in the Speech from the Throne a couple of years ago to invest in an institute for the development of democracies abroad. We know that something is happening at the religious freedom office and one day we will hear about when it is going to be put together, but clearly an institute of democratic development is something that we can do. The government promised that it would do that and should do it.

**Mr. Dean Allison:** Mr. Chair, I thank my hon. colleague from Ottawa Centre for his work on the committee as well. I certainly will not speak for what the government may do in the future in terms the road map or in looking at a centre for democracy. I know that we did commit to an organization for religious freedom. That is one of the things that we are moving forward with. We believe and understand that where the rights of minorities and religious freedom are preserved, democracy also flows from that.

I have some of the figures of what has been contributed recently. I will not go through all of the details, but in 2009-2010 over \$117 million was contributed to Mali. In 2010-2011 more than \$109 million was contributed. It dropped this past year to \$61 million, as we tried to avoid directly funding the government, which we did not think would be responsible, but instead the organizations on the ground. We will continue to do that and look forward to the time when Mali holds elections so that we can again support a government there.

*Government Orders*

**Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, my colleague started his speech by saying that the opposition was asking for boots on the ground, yet no one has suggested that. It is a pure invention. The only one who spoke about boots on the ground was the Minister of National Defence before he was muted by the government.

After long hours of debate, we are still waiting for answers from the government on questions that were asked earlier in the debate. First, why in the context of this crisis is Canada not investing in AFISMA? Why are we not committing to offering training for the African troops? Why are we investing only \$13 million, or so much less than many other countries with fewer links to Mali than we have? Indeed, Mali is a country in the Francophonie that we know very well. Moreover, why are we not committing to help the democratic process?

I know we do not want to get too close to an unelected government, but that government now has a road map for an election in July. What will we do to be sure that this election will be held in a proper fashion?

**Mr. Dean Allison:** Mr. Chair, not everyone from the opposition suggests that we should have boots on the ground, but there were some thoughts that we were not doing enough. I thought the approach that the government has taken has been fairly measured. We have responded to the French. They asked us for a cargo-lift plane for a week and then said they would like it for a month, and we have been working with them to do that.

People talk about more money. How much is enough? The point is that we have been training soldiers and elite guards. We have been working on a number of different fronts and have been doing that for a number of years. We have sent almost \$300 million over the last three years. I do not think anyone can say that as a government we have not been contributing, that we do not care or that we have not been concerned about the area.

I read about some of the initiatives we are involved in. We realize counterterrorism is a very sensitive area and an area that needs help. Therefore, before any crisis was happening in Mali, we were making those investments as a government. I am sure there will be more asked of us and there will be more requests.

Strategically, Canada wants to be able to do its part. We have been doing our part and I think we will look for other opportunities as this unfolds. It is unfolding differently every day. When we had our briefing, we heard from the officials that things are changing rapidly on the ground, so we need to continue to wait to hear what is happening.

● (2235)

**Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC):** Mr. Chair, my colleague mentioned that on January 31 we had Kerry Buck at the committee. One of the things that she said was that:

—current projects in West Africa include military training with Niger on armed forces in the context of exercise Flintlock, provision of training by police, and regional training projects for law enforcement and border security through Interpol.

I wonder if my colleague would like to comment on that?

**Mr. Dean Allison:** Mr. Chair, we continue to talk tonight about the fact that Canada has been contributing to the region. It has been involved in humanitarian aid and training. It has been involved in a number of different initiatives. One of the reasons a briefing was held in consultation with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition was to get some of this information out to the people of Canada. That has been pretty much the tack we have taken. We have been there for a number of years and we will continue to be there to help the people out.

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our honourable chair of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, with whom it is always a pleasure to work.

The hon. member talked about all the investments that we have made in a number of areas in Mali, including security, health, education and agriculture. If we want to look at this issue from an investment point of view, since this is the term that was used, if we want to ensure that all the efforts made are not wasted, it is important to help Mali overcome the crisis that it is facing, and we must do so right now.

Earlier today, another member said that the African-led International Support Mission to Mali, AFISMA, is a key mission. Why do we not provide financial support to this mission?

[*English*]

**Mr. Dean Allison:** Mr. Chair, it is certainly nice to have a member of the committee who has had some foreign affairs experience out in the field. We always appreciate the comments and the input that the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie provides to the committee.

I would just say that as we continue to listen to what the requests are and what comes in, we are supportive of the road map and what will happen. We will continue to look at what we have been doing over the last number of years. As I said, the average that we have spent has been over \$100 million annually in order to build democracy, help with humanitarian aid and work on training. We will continue to look at ways that we can do that. We were there long before this situation happened. We will continue to be there to support Mali and its people.

● (2240)

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP):** Mr. Chair, this will be 10 minutes of torture for everyone who is listening to my wonderful voice this evening.

Tonight, we are exploring the issue of Mali. The situation in Mali and in the Sahel region is far from rosy right now. After over 20 years of democracy, Mali is currently in a state of serious instability. As a Canadian and a member of this House, I am wondering about what Canada is doing to help the people of Mali.

Canada has a longstanding tradition of being a world leader when it comes to African countries, whether through its presence on the ground, its network of embassies or its NGOs, although that tradition now seems to have come to an end. In fact, Canadians have slowly been withdrawing from their participation in Africa.

*Government Orders*

From its new foreign policy to its international development assistance policy, this government is setting a dangerous precedent. It is important to be careful about such precedents since critics of our traditional allies are speaking out more and more. They are watching Canada and are confused about what is happening.

The changes are so draconian that the Minister of International Cooperation had to create a new oath for his department's employees in order to silence them about what seems to be a makeshift policy, as mentioned by many of my colleagues during this debate. The government seems to view the UN as more of a parasite than a necessary tool.

Around the time of the second world war, Canada was one of the founding members of the UN because, at the time, we believed that an organization made up of all the nations was necessary to bring peace to the world and that, together, we were—and still are—capable of preventing poverty and enhancing respect for human rights throughout the world. In short, we believed that the nations could help one another.

The French presence in Mali seems to have proved its mettle by driving back extremist and radical troops, almost without any real combat. In fact, France was able to drive back rebel groups in northern Mali. We are happy about that and we hope that Mali will be able to return to the democratic state it has enjoyed for the past 20 years as quickly as possible and that, above all, it is able to restore constitutional order. It is very important to mention that.

However, it seems that these troops have entrenched themselves in neighbouring countries, which does not bode well for the situation in a region that is already weakened by a major humanitarian crisis.

I would like to talk about some of my concerns. From Senegal in the west to Somalia in the east, the Sahel region has become a breeding ground for extremist and radical groups. Given the instability in Mali, we should be concerned about the surrounding countries. Niger appears to have a fragile balance, and according to some analysts, Mauritania could also be the next target of Salafist and Wahhabi groups.

We must therefore consider the serious humanitarian crisis that Mali is experiencing, but we must also look at a long-term solution. The same goes for the Sahel region. United Nations agencies and their humanitarian partners have launched a consolidated appeal for 2013. We are talking about 2013, not previous years.

About \$1.5 billion will be needed to help the millions of people affected by the food crisis in the Sahel region. In Mali alone, UN agencies estimate that a consolidated appeal for \$370 million will be needed for 2013. Once again, we are talking about 2013, not the previous years that government members keep mentioning.

We are not denying the fact that Canada has always been a strong partner to Mali, but right now, Canada has made a very weak contribution in response to the growing demand resulting from this terrible situation. I think we can agree that \$13 million out of \$1.5 billion is a rather small amount. I will let you do the math.

Access and security are some of the priorities. Although the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has noted an

improvement, supplies of food and other basics in the north remain very unstable, and food insecurity could get worse in this zone.

Access to food is just one example of something the Government of Canada could try to focus on.

● (2245)

According to the World Food Programme, over 585,000 people are at risk of suffering from food insecurity. So, we are not talking about participating in an armed conflict or sending troops, but about protecting people against famine. These numbers are constantly increasing.

A number of players in the field are worried about the disruption of market supply in the north. The humanitarian community is asking for the co-operation of Malian authorities to facilitate the movement of commodities and humanitarian assistance to the north. Moreover, several explosions of mines in the Mopti region, along the main roads leading to the north, are threatening civilians and could block relief operations.

On October 12, the Security Council had already adopted resolution 2071 dealing with cases of abuse, sexual violence, human rights violations and, above all, the recruiting of child soldiers in northern Mali. Many concerns continue to be voiced in Mali regarding the protection of human rights, after some organizations reported summary executions and abuse. Ethnic-based reprisals targeted civilians in certain areas formerly controlled by armed groups.

Moreover, some people living in the north are said to have fled, for fear of reprisals. Amnesty International said that the Malian army arrested and executed more than 20 civilians in the north. We see an opportunity for Canada to provide monitoring and training to avoid this kind of abuse of human rights violations. This could be done through AFISMA, the mission led by the African Union. In fact, it is possible to contribute to this mission but, as we mentioned a number of times, Canada refuses to do so.

As for Human Rights Watch, it has also accused the Malian army of summarily executing at least 13 alleged pro-Islamists, but also armed groups of executing at least seven Malian soldiers. Consequently, this organization asked at the end of January that international observers be sent to Mali.

I must also mention the issue of child soldiers. Several NGOs in Mali have reported that children are forced to join armed groups. Under the Rome Statute, the recruiting of children under the age of 15 by armed groups is a war crime. This crime has terrible consequences for all populations, for children and for the families. I think these abuses deserve special attention and action, by Canada in particular.

Another troubling fact: according to CARE International, a specific service for the protection of women and children has not been established. For its part, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs points out the urgent need to strengthen response capacity, primarily in order to educate people about the danger posed by mines, to provide psychosocial support and to address gender-based violence.

*Government Orders*

Current resources are not enough to provide minimal prevention and response. As my colleague from Laurier—Sainte-Marie stated, prevention is important. She also said that the government does not seem to know what prevention is.

At present, no child welfare project has received funding. Thus, not even Canada has provided funding or created a project to protect children. We have to take action, and Canada should be a leader in that area. Canada must do more than just closely monitor these problems. It is fine for the Minister of International Cooperation to go to Burkina Faso. However, we have to take action, not just proclaim our good intentions.

I would also like to quickly address the question of the Sahel and the long-term future of Mali. We have 21 embassies in Africa, a continent of 53 countries.

My time has expired and I have only managed to say part of what I had to say. I will now take questions.

● (2250)

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Chair, let us be thorough and precise. The hon. member encouraged us to fund food security. The \$13 million announced by the Minister of International Cooperation is largely dedicated to meet that challenge. That amount is in addition to the \$57 million already announced for the entire Sahel in 2012, an amount that will continue to fund operations in 2013.

However, aside from food security, aside from child safety, which is a concern for all agencies funded by the \$13 million announced by the Minister of International Cooperation, what would the hon. member like us to do in Mali exactly, because her colleagues, the hon. members for Ottawa-Centre and St. John's East have caused a little panic. I was on the panel looking into peacekeeping. The resolution does not provide for a peacekeeping operation. The United Nations resolution provides every measure necessary and authorizes the Malian authorities to retake regions under terrorist control. It is a combat operation.

Would the hon. member like Canadian soldiers to be involved?

**Ms. Ève Pécelet:** Mr. Chair, I would like to begin by talking about the \$13 million and \$57 million. The \$13 million is part of the \$1.5 billion that is needed for 2013 alone. I can see just how good Canada's intentions are when I see that all of our traditional allies have given at least four or five times more. I think that it is a pittance, given that the need is so much greater: \$1.5 billion.

As for what Canada can do, I spoke at length about that in my speech. We should focus on children, women and food security.

We are talking about a peacekeeping mission. During the 20th African Union summit on January 27, Ban Ki-moon spoke about the possibility of deploying peacekeeping forces in Mali. We are not saying that we will participate, but Canada could play a part. We could contribute financially to the European Union mission and participate in a potential peacekeeping mission.

That is part of the Conservative policy that we are criticizing. We should not be trying to fix the problem, we should be trying to prevent it. That is what a government does. It prevents these issues. We should not wait until someone falls, then help them up and offer

a band-aid. We should try to keep them from falling in the first place. That is what we have been trying to do for months, in fact, for the two years since we were elected.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I thank my hon. colleague from La Pointe-de-l'Île for her speech.

My question is as follows: would she agree with us, with the comments made by our colleague from Toronto Centre, our interim leader, when he asked the government to look a little further ahead than just a week or a month when it comes to Canada's commitment?

There are many ways Canada can make commitments. I agree with my colleague regarding the fact that, financially, we could be doing a lot more. We could contribute more to the United Nations, although this government often hesitates. There are so many ways we can participate.

But would my colleague agree that this should be an open commitment, in the sense that we say to our allies, our African allies, the African Union, the European community, that Canada is fundamentally interested in solutions that will help Mali, that will make this African region more secure? We will not make any decisions based on the schedule of one plane for a week or a month, but we will support the people of Africa and our allies in order to come up with a lasting, long-term, regional solution, and not just in a conflict zone that we desert at the first sign of improvement, as my colleague said.

● (2255)

**Ms. Ève Pécelet:** Mr. Chair, I am not sure what kind of answer the hon. member is looking for. Would he like me to say I agree with what the Liberal leader said?

I believe my speech was very clear on that topic. Of course, humanitarian aid is important, as is financial aid. But Canada's role has always gone beyond financial aid. When it comes to peacekeeping missions, for example, Canada's soldiers do more than keep an eye on the situation; they also monitor elections, protect civilians and educate people.

We recognize that to facilitate the peace and democracy process, we need to offer more than financial or military aid; we need to contribute our practical expertise in democracy, as my colleague from Laurier—Sainte-Marie pointed out.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs indicated in a statement that our tradition of sending peacekeepers and contributing to peacekeeping missions was nothing but a footnote to Canadian history.

In a simple statement about Canada's contribution to world peace, he completely denied our Canadian values. This shows the Conservatives' complete disregard for democracy around the world.

**Ms. Hélène Lavergère (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP):** Mr. Chair, in very difficult situations like the one happening now in Mali, women and children often suffer the most.

*Government Orders*

Not only is this true in time of conflict, war or military operations like the current one, but last year's events also showed it clearly: women and children often suffer the most. Our first thoughts should probably go to them.

My hon. colleague mentioned child soldiers earlier. Could she expand a bit on that?

**Ms. Ève Pécelet:** Mr. Chair, women and children are often the victims of war.

I have repeated this many times, in particular at the hearings of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, a sub-committee of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. I asked the committee to study the use of rape as a weapon of war.

In such conflicts, women and children are victims in the long term. For example, children are often left to fend for themselves when they turn 15. When wars end, these children, who have been trained as soldiers and to kill, often consider their armed groups as their family.

I talked about initiatives that provide psychosocial help to families, children and women. Not one organization has been funded and no action has been taken.

It is important for Canada, as a country that respects the rights of women and children, to provide its expertise to Africa in order to help these women and children break the vicious circle created by conflicts. They are truly the forgotten victims in these conflicts. We talk about the armed groups, but we very seldom talk about the civilians, the women and children who are truly affected by these conflicts.

This would be one way for Canada to show leadership, especially with respect to women and children.

I believe that all MPs will agree with me because we truly have to help these most vulnerable groups.

*[English]*

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I am pleased to lend my voice to today's important take note debate as a humble parliamentarian and a former Canadian military member with service in Afghanistan.

The situation in Mali is of serious concern to all of us. Our government has long been committed to combatting terrorists worldwide. The Department of Foreign Affairs has been leading our government's approach in Africa and elsewhere to help build the capacity of countries so they are better able to protect their populations from the threat of terrorists. The Canadian armed forces has also played an important role in this whole of government approach, training security forces in west African countries.

Terrorist groups and criminal networks have recently been gaining ground in northern Mali, posing not only a threat to the security and stability of Mali, but also to the Sahel and wider western African region. The terrorist presence in the north was reprehensible, sowing fear and destruction village by village. For example, in the historic city of Timbuktu, these extremist groups desecrated tombs, smashed

graves and holy shrines and destroyed irreplaceable monasteries from the 13th century.

Just before Christmas, the United Nations Security Council recognized the gravity of this situation as a threat to the international community as a whole and passed resolution 2085.

In January the security situation in Mali deteriorated rapidly even further as heavily armed Islamist groups began to press south. This also had the potential to endanger Bamako, the capital of Mali, with a population of almost two million people. At the request of the Malian president and in line with United Nations Security Council resolution 2085, the government of France launched a military operation on January 11 to stop that advance and stabilize the security situation in the country.

This operation enables the African-led international support mission to Mali to take over the lead and help Mali recover its territorial integrity and full sovereignty.

Currently the French-led response in support of the Malian forces involves the participation of neighbouring African countries from the economic community of west African states, or ECOWAS. It also has the support of key allies and partners such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and the European Union.

For our part, Canada is undertaking a coordinated wall of government response. That has always been our government's approach to unstable areas suffering insurgent activities and will remain so. As the Prime Minister stated, we are committed to working diplomatically with our allies to determine the best course of action. At the same time, Canada continues to provide humanitarian aid and development assistance to the region, with a particular emphasis on food security.

Our government has also clearly set out the parameters for Canadian military contribution to this mission. Canada is prepared, consistent with UN Security Council resolution 2085, to provide limited and clearly defined logistical support to assist the forces that are intervening in Mali. Our government is not and will not be considering a direct Canadian combat role in Mali.

In fitting with these parameters and the response to an urgent request from our French partners, our government agreed to provide heavy lift aircraft to France for a limited period and we provided it with lightening speed. A C-17 Globemaster was quickly deployed on January 15, with approximately 40 military personnel for an initial period of one week. The Minister of National Defence was at CFB Trenton to wish the crew and personnel a safe departure. At the future request of the government of France, Canada extended the commitment of its C-17 Globemaster aircraft until February 15.

As we speak, members of the Canadian armed forces are working with their French colleagues, flying essential equipment, supplies and personnel between France and Bamako. They have already transported over half a million pounds of cargo. Canada is making a critical contribution. In fact, France's ambassador to Canada recently said that logistics was something essential and really invaluable in the present situation.

*Government Orders*

• (2300)

Canada is one of only a small number of countries that can provide this very important capability on such short notice. It is a contribution that has allowed our French and African partners to stop the terrorist groups from moving south and to make important gains on the ground.

French troops are now refocusing on the north, progressively securing key villages and towns, such as Timbuktu, and they conquered the last stronghold of the insurgents, the town of Kidal.

This mission reflects the high degree of readiness of the Royal Canadian Air Force. It has proven this ability time and time again, proudly showing the Canadian flag and supporting operations over Canadian territory, Haiti, Libya, Afghanistan and now over Mali, as well as in some 15 other ongoing missions, whether at sea in the Arabian Gulf, or on the ground, training in Afghanistan.

The Canadian Armed Forces' effort in Mali underscores the continued importance of having an agile and versatile expeditionary force for the future. This is why our government is committed to investing in the modern equipment it needs.

Early on, our government was quick to recognize that the changing and uncertain global environment required Canada's military to have its own reliable, independent access to strategic airlift. I would note that in the time I was deployed in Afghanistan, I was thankful that the government provided this capacity.

As members may recall, our government went ahead and acquired the C-17 Globemaster transport aircraft, so we are not relying anymore on the AN-24s or Russian aircraft.

Only 12 days after entering service with the Canadian Armed Forces, Canada's first C-17 carried out its initial mission, delivering emergency relief supplies to the people of Jamaica in the wake of Hurricane Dean. It was called upon yet again to transport troops and deliver supplies in Haiti's darkest hours during Operation HESTIA. It has done yeomen service in Afghanistan, alongside other key investments, such as the Hercules and Chinook aircraft, the light armoured vehicles and the Leopard 2 tanks that helped save countless Canadian lives.

Once again, we are seeing these investments pay off, to the benefit of Canada, to the benefit of our allies and, today, to the benefit of our efforts in Mali. We are proud that the Canadian Armed Forces are able to make such a critical contribution.

As the Minister of Foreign Affairs has indicated, we will continue to monitor the situation closely, consult with allies and update Parliament as events unfold.

However, let me emphasize that Canada's commitment to countering the global cancer of criminal networks and terrorists is steadfast, because it is important to the security of Canada, to the safety of Canadians.

I know that the members of this House will agree, and I encourage them to express their support.

• (2305)

**Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP):** Mr. Chair, we have been talking a bit tonight about what the causes were for the situation

in Mali, an overview of a year ago with the coup, of course, and then a perfect storm that allowed for some of the extremists to intervene.

However, one of the things we have to consider is that we are also dealing with environmental issues here, and I would like comments from the member on this. We know, from people having studied failed states and weak states, that it is because of many different aspects. One of the concerns in the Sahel area is that there is drought, severe drought, not just drought that has happened recently. Many have observed this has been because of climate change.

It is one thing to look at what is happening right now with the intervention of extremists in Mali, but it is also another thing to understand that there is an issue around climate change, the fact that the climate has really devastated this area and that we need to do more to help people there adapt to climate change.

I would like to hear his thoughts about the fact that there is the environmental aspect to this, as well as the human aspect, and what we should be doing to ensure people can withstand and adapt to climate change, so that they are not as vulnerable from outside variables and, in this case, from outside extremists.

• (2310)

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Mr. Chair, I would like to answer my colleague's great question.

First, to be able to work on the climate, we need to have a safe and secure environment. That means we need to get rid of the terrorist activities. We need to establish peace in the country first, and that is the main going on right now.

Right now, with lightning speed, the French, followed by the African troops, re-secured and basically liberated the territory from Islamic forces. However, another problem is now keeping that land. In the military it is not enough to defeat enemy forces, but all the ground has to be kept

Once a safe and secure environment is established, Canada is there to help, and I heard tonight that a lot of funds have been committed to Mali. They were committed before the situation deteriorated with the Islamic forces.

Absolutely, I think that the government is monitoring the situation. I am not a member of cabinet, but I am quite sure that persons who are more competent than I am are doing the monitoring in this regard.

**Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I thank my colleague for his speech so late this evening, but I would like him to comment on the inherent contradiction of the government that has been exposed by this debate.

The government is saying that Canada has invested in Mali in the past, that Canada has been there for decades. Now that the country is in crisis, we are told that we do not need to do much more, because we have done so much in the past.

*Government Orders*

Why, for example, when it is time to offer logistics to an ally, to friends, do we offer a plane for a week, or maybe a month? Why do we not want to invest in AFISMA and in training, and not want to be a part of it? We did a lot in the past. That is why we are not proposing any help for the democratic process for the restoration of democracy. We will wait for July. Until then, we will have nothing to do with that. That is why we are investing only \$13 million when countries that have been much less involved with Mali in the past are now helping much more than we are.

How come we are doing so little?

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Mr. Chair, I can tell the hon. member that we are investing in the country. We are monitoring the situation and how it is evolving on the ground.

I can walk the walk and talk the talk and tell the hon. member what is going on right now on the ground. Basically there was a meeting with the West African chiefs of staff, who committed 5,000 troops. They committed more troops to AFISMA and to help rebuild Mali.

The situation is being monitored and we committed money for that, and we will see how the situation evolves.

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Chair, would the hon. member, my colleague, agree with me that we do not invest for the sake of spending money but for the sake of results, and we take heart from the fact that our allies and our African partners are getting results.

There is something like 4,000 French troops on the ground, and they have had success. There are 3,800 troops from ECOWAS, most in Bamako but now moving northwards, and they have had success. Troops mobilized within Africa are meeting the military demand, and therefore none of our allies, who do not have troops based in Africa, are participating with troops on the ground. We are simply following their example.

Does the hon. member not agree that this has proven to be, in a very short time, a wise course of action, and that our longer term commitments to Mali, which have given institutional results in the form of some of the best units of the Malian army and the institution that is now serving as the headquarters for AFISMA, will be continued over the longer term?

In the meantime, the most urgent need, which we have met with incremental funding, is the humanitarian need. That is probably the issue that we in Canada need to be following most closely, so long as the military mission continues to progress in a positive direction.

● (2315)

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Mr. Chair, obviously the military situation is evolving in a very positive way. Once the situation is resolved, the aid that we have already committed will be able to resolve the humanitarian situation that exists in Mali today.

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I congratulate my colleague on his remarks and note his service in the Canadian armed forces and his experience in Afghanistan. Perhaps because of that experience, I wonder if he would share with the House his view on whether Canada could, as some of my colleagues have asked, adopt a more robust role militarily in supporting allies.

I agree entirely with his assessment of the importance of pushing back the extremist and terrorist threat. I think he correctly highlighted that success. I do not disagree necessarily with his view that a direct combat role for Canadian Forces at this point is not something the government should look at. The Prime Minister has been clear on that.

However, is there another role than providing this airplane for five weeks? Could it be training or logistic support, perhaps in an office in Bamako? Are there other ways that the military could provide non-combat support other than the plane simply going between Bamako and Paris?

The member's experience in Afghanistan would show that this is invaluable and I wonder if he would share his thoughts on that with the House.

**Mr. Corneliu Chisu:** Mr. Chair, as a former military person, I think that if a request for that were made, it would be considered by our government.

I can say that there is a lot of support being provided in Africa at this point. On January 22, the U.S. air force deployed French troops in Mali. Also the Germans and others are supporting the cleanup of Malian territory from terrorists, and also from neighbouring countries. We also need to note that January 16 was very close to the French intervention and that it was on January 11 that there was the terrorist attack on Amenas, north of the Malian border.

I would also like to inform the hon. member that I participated in the emergency debate at the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly that took place from January 21 to 23. There, I had quite good information on what was going on in Mali.

To conclude, I think our government will consider the necessary steps as the situation evolves, on the premise that the Prime Minister outlined that we will not provide combat troops on the ground.

**Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I will indicate at the outset that I will be splitting my time with the member for Ottawa—Vanier.

Last week we got our first glimpse of the government's thinking on this conflict in Mali. It was instructive in a way that the government possibly did not intend it to be. When General Vance was asked what Canada's military goal in Mali is, he spent a lot of time sort of figuring out what our military goal is and finally settled on the notion that our military goal is actually to support France.

At one level, we actually do not have a military goal, other than to support France. I guess the follow-up question would be what is France's military goal in this region. We are left with the notion that, if we are supporting France, we have to hope that its military goal is the same as ours.

I would have preferred to have heard more directly from the government. There has been some dancing around by the parliamentary secretary and others, who are saying that the Sahel region is an area of significant interest to our security, and international and regional security.



*Government Orders*

Frankly, the parliamentary secretaries have been quite articulate. It would have been useful had the government, even a couple of weeks ago, articulated the issue of Islamicist insurrections, Islamist threats to the region and to the area, and articulated a plan to us. Thus far we have heard bits and pieces of this and that, but no overall plan of what we will actually be doing in this area.

It is in our security interest that the Islamist threat be contained, be degraded. I do not anticipate that it will actually ever be defeated, but certainly it can be put in a position where its ability to inflict harm on others is minimized to the greatest extent possible.

If there is a caution in all of this, it is to resist the temptation to be too ambitious. Mali is a bit of a mess, to put it delicately. There have been coups and counter-coups, and the rather shadowy Captain Sanogo operates on a level that is not entirely—and probably is not in any way—accountable, transparent or in any sense democratic.

He commands an army that is poorly trained and, frankly, is prone to taking into its own hands some extra-judicial killings. The Tuareg people do not recognize, at the best of times, the authority of the Bamako government. They are a very fierce and independent Berber group of people who have acquired, since the fall of Libya, a significant cache of armaments, and from time to time have hooked up with the jihadists to actually create a very formidable fighting force, which precipitated the intervention of the French just a few weeks ago.

The whole situation with respect to the Tuareg is quite confusing. They do not recognize the Bamako authority. They make common cause with the jihadists, but as soon they try to declare the northern part of Mali as an independent Berber state, then the jihadists and they part company.

One of the things that has not been discussed this evening is the Islamist concept of time. This is a 7th century version of Islam, and we have a 21st century military. Our sense of time is not their sense of time. Their individual defeat, such as what they are experiencing currently at the hands of the French, is not important to them, because they are doing “God’s will” and when they are doing God’s will, they can never lose.

I am going to turn the balance of time over to my colleague. I look forward to a few questions from colleagues in the House.

● (2320)

**Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC):** Mr. Chair, our view on this side of the House is that the concept of time for these groups should be that their time is over. That should be our message from all sides of the House, and certainly from all capitals.

However, let us clarify the question of what kind of mission this is. We have had some confusion about peacekeeping missions and combat missions. There are roughly 80,000 troops on UN peacekeeping missions at the moment. There are, what colleagues in the NDP neglect to mention, over a hundred thousand troops still in NATO missions. Canada has about a thousand in the most important of those missions. Does the hon. member for Scarborough—Guildwood agree that this mission is neither of those?

It is certainly not a NATO mission and given its mandate, it is certainly not a UN peacekeeping mission. It is a pseudo *sui generis* combat mission led by Africans but with strong French participation, because France has troops based in Africa. That formula has worked so far, and so long as it continues to work, we in Canada should not be questioning it.

● (2325)

**Hon. John McKay:** Mr. Chair, of course this is not a peacekeeping mission. There is no peace to be kept, so that is a non-starter as a question. The question does exhibit a certain confusion on the part of the government though, because the government’s position at this point in the evening is that we are actually supporting the French in their mission. Whatever the French mission is, that is our mission.

The government is not supporting the UN mandated mission, which is quite a robust mission. Hence, the contradiction in the government’s position that it is supporting the French but, for whatever reason, not the UN. The consequence of that is that when the French leave, when they decide their mission is over, our mission is over. Therefore, the African troops are left on their own without any support from Canada.

**Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP):** Mr. Chair, I have been in this take note debate since it began many hours ago, trying to discern if we actually have very much difference between all of us here in the House of Commons. We are debating a situation in Mali, in which Canada is currently playing a minimal role with an aircraft support plane to deliver goods. We are talking about a more humanitarian mission going forward in the future. I think members on all sides of the House might be prepared to consider a United Nations peacekeeping mission, if there were one.

We have been at great pains to try to find fault with each other and partisan difference. However, I think this is one of those rare discussions where we are debating something where the situation is fluid. We want to make sure that Canada does not get engaged in Mali in a way that deters from our fundamental values.

I would like to ask my friend, because I thought his comments about the nature of Islamists was fascinating, if he thinks on this one occasion in the House we might have more in common than in difference?

**Hon. John McKay:** Mr. Chair, I would dearly love to say yes to my hon. colleague. My problem is that the government has yet to state its goal, tell us what the plan is and recognize that whatever the plan is it has to involve AFISMA. Also, real money has to be put behind AFISMA. If we do not do that, we are almost setting it up as a failure.

As I said to my colleague, I would love to be agreeable and have some direct conversation with my colleagues as to why the government to this point has not supported AFISMA, but it has not and that is the critical question here.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger (Ottawa—Vanier, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I am a bit disappointed with the way this so-called take note debate is going. During a take note debate, we are supposed to explore possible avenues and measures. We certainly need to determine our objectives.

*Government Orders*

The government side mainly spoke about the historical background of the situation. They talked about things that happened far in the past or in more recent weeks, but they spoke very little about the future. I get the impression that the government is using this debate to see what the opposition parties want. It is unfortunate because, if we want to have an honest take note debate, the government has to put forward some options and listen to the opposition parties' reactions. That is not exactly what is happening, and that bothers me.

It is important to put this into context. I am going to share with the House what the Minister of Foreign Affairs said. He was in Washington not too long ago, on January 28. A journalist asked him:

[*English*]

Turning to the crisis in North and West Africa, do you believe that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's expanding control of northern Mali presents a threat to Canada and Canadian interests?

[*Translation*]

Here is what the minister responded:

[*English*]

I think the great struggle of our generation is the struggle against radical extremists and international terrorists wherever they are in the world. That's not an issue exclusively about Mali's neighbourhood. It's an issue for all humanity.

I totally agree with the minister on that. It is indeed one of the great struggles of our time and it is a struggle, as the member for Toronto Centre said, in a diminishing world where everything is linked.

If we indeed believe that we have to counter the terrorist threat when it manifests itself by taking hold of two-thirds of a country in West Africa, where the series of neighbours, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania, have borders that are very porous and are a stone's throw from Europe, one would have to wonder, if indeed that is the philosophy of the government, why it is not acting more. It may translate to boots on the ground, but it may not have to. However, it certainly has to translate to help in the funds, which have not occurred, to fight this situation. It can translate into training, which has been talked about both by the Minister of National Defence and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It can translate into other means and so forth. However, I am a little worried about this disconnect between the philosophy that animates the government, and on the other hand, the seeming timidity in responding to a real threat.

There are three things I want to bring up very quickly, which I hope the government would take note of and explore. First, it seems that the major cities have been cleared, but there is a vast territory to look into now. There are 3,000 forces from ECOWAS.

[*Translation*]

ECOWAS will provide 3,000 soldiers and Mali itself will provide 6,000, which represents an average-sized deployment over such a vast territory. So they will need help.

Does Canada, through ECOWAS and the African Union, plan on doing something to stabilize the situation in Mali and maybe even continue to counter the terrorist forces?

And what will we specifically do to help with the upcoming election, which seems to be a very important reason for the government to resume negotiations with or reinstate direct assistance

to the Malian government? Will we unfreeze some of this money to help run a real election? Some things could be done from Canada. Elections Canada, New Brunswick, Élections Québec and Ontario all have French-language capabilities. They may be interested in participating.

Will there be an observation mission and will we participate if there is another one organized by an organization like La Francophonie, for example? These are things to explore. Perhaps the minister will come speak to us later. I think that is important.

We have not heard this evening about the Malian diaspora here, in Canada, and elsewhere in the world. There are hundreds of thousands of refugees—390,000, I heard.

Of that number, some have families here in Canada. We could have been talking about family reunification or speeding up the immigration and refugee process to help the diaspora and the people of Mali. There has been no talk about that. The government has not proposed anything to that effect, where in other circumstances, it wanted to help by speeding up the process, but maybe not in Africa.

We have not heard the government talk about that and I would like it to say a few words about that.

● (2330)

**Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.):** Mr. Chair, I congratulate my colleague on his speech. I know he was a little pressed for time, since he had only five minutes left. I would like to give him an opportunity to speak more about the role Canada can play in supporting the return to democracy to Mali.

It is a failure, a difficult situation. The government mentioned a road map to democracy a number of times. I think everyone agrees that the status quo cannot last and that Mali needs a stable, open and transparent democracy again, like the one that Canada bragged about helping to establish in the past. It was obviously more fragile than we thought.

Does my colleague have any specific ideas? He mentioned Elections Canada and other provinces. But what can Canada do to steer the Malian government back towards a real democracy? What does he see Canada's role to be in this?

● (2335)

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** Mr. Chair, I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss this issue.

If the government is really saying that it wants to work with a democratic government and that there is a road map for an election in July, there are many things that the Government of Canada, NGOs and Canadian government agencies can do to ensure that democracy is restored in Mali and Bamako.

I mentioned observers earlier. Canada has taken part in such an exercise before by sending nearly 500 observers to Europe to observe the election in Ukraine.

*Government Orders*

If Canada really wanted to express its desire to see democracy restored in Mali, could it dispatch a rather sizable observation mission? Could it send police officers with such a mission? Of course, we can expect that the election will not go smoothly in certain parts of Mali, especially given the terrorist groups who do not support democracy.

These are two simple ideas that the government must consider. It must come back to Parliament and tell us what direction it wants to take. It could even take the opportunity next week at the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development to indicate what it intends to do.

[*English*]

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I listened intently to my friend when he answered the question about what we could possibly do and he said “lots of things”. We could actually do lots of things. NGOs could do lots of things. The government could do lots of things. When he finally arrived at specifying one thing, he specified an election observation mission, and that is interesting. The country he was referring to was Ukraine, which is just a tiny bit different than Mali. There are not a lot of terrorists running around in Ukraine today. I am not sure how we would send 500 Canadians to Mali and protect them. We would probably have to send a lot of troops there to protect the Canadian observation mission to observe that election.

Some form of international observation mission I am sure will be suggested and Canada will certainly consider it when that is suggested by the appropriate international organization. I do not think sending 500 Canadian civilians with a lot of Canadian soldiers to protect them from the al-Qaeda terrorists makes a lot of sense right now.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mauril Bélanger:** Mr. Chair, I am not sure if there was a mistake in the translation, but I did not talk about soldiers. I talked about police forces. This has often been done in many countries to ensure a minimal level of protection. I did not say it was absolutely necessary to send 500. I was giving an example of what has been done elsewhere. It could be a different number.

If we invited members of the diaspora, people who have become Canadian citizens and who understand how a democracy works, a large number of them would probably be willing to return to their country of origin to take part in observation missions, for instance.

Why is the parliamentary secretary being so negative? What a wet blanket. We are having a take note debate in order to explore ideas. We are proposing solutions and he reacts negatively to them, saying that maybe we should be more minimalist.

His Minister of Foreign Affairs has said that humanity's greatest challenge is terrorism. In the current situation in Mali, terrorists have practically taken control of the entire country. Yet he tells us not to overreact, not to stir things up too much. I find that attitude quite disappointing.

[*English*]

**Mr. Peter Braid (Kitchener—Waterloo, CPC):** Mr. Chair, I certainly appreciate the opportunity to participate in this take note debate on this important topic as we approach the midnight hour. I

want to thank my colleagues across the House of Commons for participating in the discussion this evening.

As the House knows, events in Mali are unfolding quickly, and the Government of Canada is gravely concerned about the growing humanitarian crisis, not just in Mali but in the wider Sahel region. I welcome the opportunity to shed light on Canada's current role in providing assistance to Mali and in the Sahel.

Our hearts go out to the people of Mali. For nearly two decades, supported by a government committed to democracy, Malians have persevered against terrible odds. They have worked hard to reduce hunger, malnutrition, corruption and illiteracy, and Canada has been proud to support all of their efforts in this regard.

Our government developed a long-term program that supported Mali's own strategy for reducing poverty. Within that framework, the Canadian International Development Agency, CIDA, focused on three priorities: the needs of children and youth, including the health of newborns and their mothers; food security; and governance. Our investments helped to generate impressive results, especially in the areas of health and education.

For example, between 2006 and 2010, the rate of prenatal consultation increased from 75% to 79%. Between 2007 and 2010, the percentage of live births attended by skilled health personnel jumped from 41% to 43%. More recently, in 2010, primary students received more than 1.2 million new textbooks, which allowed Mali to meet its target ratio of two textbooks per student. That will have a significant impact on the quality of their education.

In these troubled times, Canada remains a steadfast partner in Mali and the wider region in West Africa.

Drought and poor harvest over the last two years, combined with conflict in the north, has jeopardized the access of some two million people in Mali to nutritious food. It has put at risk the education of countless children and youth and has forced more than 385,000 people to flee their homes in search of sanctuary, either within Mali or in neighbouring countries. For that reason, Canada continues to provide humanitarian assistance, and in a very strong way.

Our support is helping to distribute hygiene kits to prevent the spread of illness and disease. It is feeding children suffering from hunger and malnutrition. It is providing blankets and shelter to families who have left everything behind. It is enabling families to earn money so that they can meet their basic needs with dignity.

Our government will continue to respond to the evolving humanitarian needs of the Malian people. Through our partners, such as the international Red Cross movement, the UN World Food Programme and Canadian NGOs, our support is reaching people desperately in need, both in Mali and in affected countries.

Canada's support does not end at Mali's borders. Canada has a long history of assisting our friends in Africa. In fact, last year, nearly half of CIDA's assistance focused on sub-Saharan Africa. In 2011-2012, Africa received 62% of our total food security program, 60% of our agricultural support and 63% of our health support. These are significant numbers.

*Government Orders*

Canada is a leader in food security. We are the first G8 country to deliver on its L'Aquila food security commitment. Our government has untied food assistance.

● (2340)

As recently as 2007, over half of Canadian food assistance to developing countries had to be purchased in Canada. Tied aid is not effective and it is not efficient.

We are focusing on achieving results for taxpayer investments. Tied aid undermines the ability of developing nations to produce or buy goods for themselves and delays the assistance from reaching the people who so desperately need it.

That is why our Conservative government untied all food aid in 2008 and set 2012-13 as the deadline for fully untying the goods and services delivered through Canadian aid programs. Through our support, 7.8 million chronically food insecure people have been given food in Ethiopia, for example. Over 1.3 million people in Mali have been given emergency food and nutrition assistance. These are results.

We work with African countries both bilaterally and regionally. At the heart of Canada's approach is our support for African-led solutions to development challenges and regional problems. We support major global and multilateral organizations that work in Africa, notably the African Union, the African Development Bank, the UN World Food Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

With our assistance, African countries have made significant progress on a number of fronts in recent years. We know that issues like drought, disease and conflict do not respect national borders. That is why we are taking a regional approach with regard to our assistance in Mali.

Last February, for example, Canada answered an emergency appeal from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This helped to provide essential items, such as blankets, kitchen sets, shelter and sanitary supplies to Malians who had fled to Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. In that same month Canada provided support to the International Red Cross to deliver household items and hygiene kits as well as food to some 600,000 people, including populations in the north of Mali where the needs were greatest and the risks were highest.

We took further steps this past summer. In August Canada made a contribution to the World Food Programme. This helped to provide food and nutrition assistance to Malian refugees in Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso.

Members know that we stood shoulder to shoulder with our friends in the Sahel region, by creating the Sahel crisis matching fund in response to an escalating food security and nutrition crisis in the region. As part of the matching fund initiative, CIDA allocated funds for the provision of emergency food in the region.

Canada has been a strong friend to the people of Mali and the Sahel region and we continue to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable, particularly women and children.

Just last week at the donors' pledging conference in Ethiopia, the Minister of International Cooperation announced additional assistance for a number of initiatives aimed at addressing pressing humanitarian needs.

We will not abandon Mali. We have collaborated with committed partners in the country for a long time. We are drawing on this expertise now to support work on the front lines. We will continue to stand with the people of Mali in their time of need.

● (2345)

**Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC):** Mr. Chair, my colleague talked about textbooks being given to Mali in order for school children to have opportunities. It is very personal for me because for the last 10 years my family has supported a little girl in Mali through World Vision. Her name is Tolatta Togo. Tolatta has the opportunity to go to school.

Could my colleague comment on how Canada's contribution will help girls like Tolatta to get an education?

● (2350)

**Mr. Peter Braid:** Mr. Chair, education is a key focus of our development efforts, not only in Mali but across the African continent. Supporting education is critical to helping to build a strong society, to helping to give children and youth the tools they need to succeed in their respective societies. This is just one example where Canada, through our international development agency, CIDA, is having a direct positive impact on the people of Mali, particularly on its children in this case.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Stéphane Dion:** Mr. Chair, I would like to thank my colleague for his speech and all members for participating in this debate.

I deplore many things, especially the fact that no minister has spoken since we began this debate. I cannot say whether or not the ministers were present, as that would be unparliamentary. However, I can say that they did not participate. That says a lot about the government's minimalist approach: do as little as possible and claim, like many others have, that there is no need to do much more. That has been illustrated throughout this debate at every angle.

Will the member undertake to have his government and his ministers ensure that Canada upholds its reputation and gives Mali much more help than is currently being provided? Why has the Minister for La Francophonie not said a word in this debate, as though it was not important for Canada to be a member of la Francophonie?

[*English*]

**Mr. Peter Braid:** Mr. Chair, I certainly reject the premise of the question. Our Prime Minister has shown significant leadership with respect to Africa. The child and maternal health initiative is the pride of all Canadians. It is a signature Canadian initiative that is making an incredible mark on the world, saving the lives of women and children primarily in the continent of Africa.

*Government Orders*

In terms of the leadership of our Minister of International Cooperation, a number of months ago we established a matching fund so that Canadians who donated to the Sahel crisis would have their donations matched. More recently, our minister was in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, where he pledged additional Canadian support for humanitarian efforts in Mali. That is leadership.

**Mr. Bob Dechert (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPC):** Mr. Chair, earlier this evening we heard a lot from the opposition about how the Canadian government has somehow abandoned Africa, and yet statistics show that since the time that the Liberal member who just asked the question was a minister in the Canadian government, the Government of Canada has doubled its assistance to Africa. Last year nearly half of all CIDA's assistance was focused on sub-Saharan Africa. In 2011-12, Africa received 62% of the agency's total food security programming, 60% of its agricultural support and 63% of its health support.

I wonder if my hon. colleague would comment on those statistics and say why he thinks the opposition is confused about the Canadian government's commitment to Africa.

**Mr. Peter Braid:** Mr. Chair, that is a question that I am pleased to have the opportunity to answer and one that is really a patently unfair notion with respect to our government.

I am the vice-chair of the Canada-Africa Parliamentary Association, and I know a bit about our government's commitment to Africa. We were the first G8 country to fulfill our commitment to double aid to Africa. That is leadership.

I mentioned earlier the Prime Minister's initiative on child and maternal health, which benefits primarily women and children in Africa. We have untied food aid, which is a particularly significant initiative.

Let me briefly explain one important initiative that pertains to my own riding of Kitchener—Waterloo, to which our government provided strong support. Through the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, the next Einstein initiative has the goal of finding the next Einstein in Africa.

Supporting Africans, helping Africans find the solutions they need to their own challenges, that is leadership.

• (2355)

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Stéphane Dion:** Mr. Chair, frankly, if France had not intervened in Mali, al-Qaeda would have control of a west African country, with all the risks that represents. Fortunately, the French intervened.

Instead of always trying to minimize Canada's role, it would be nice if the Prime Minister of Canada would say that Canada will be there to offer the logistical support required, without necessarily sending in troops, since the French are capable of freeing these towns on their own. Helping does not just involve sending in a plane for a week and then being forced to lend it for a few more weeks. The Prime Minister should have said that Canada would intervene.

The government was so proud to say that we would play a role in Afghanistan and so proud of providing \$350 million in assistance to

Libya. That is what the intervention in Libya cost. There is talk of offering Mali a minimum of \$13 million. The Conservatives are always doing the minimum. I do not understand why the government changed in this regard. It is true: the government does the minimum. It does as little as possible.

In my opinion, the government needs to wake up and take strong action when it comes to democracy, humanitarian aid, logistic support and the training of African troops. That is what we should be doing.

[*English*]

**Mr. Peter Braid:** Mr. Chair, I am somewhat surprised by the question. I know my hon. colleague has been here for this evening's discussion and debate, but it seems as if perhaps he did not listen.

Our government has made significant investments in the country of Mali. We have been involved in international development efforts in Mali since 1962. In 2010-11 we contributed over \$110 million. Our commitment remains very strong.

We want to see the return to democracy in Mali and we support those efforts. The French effort, the military effort, is unfolding as we speak and it is progressing well. We need to let that situation continue to unfold. It is going in the right direction. We look forward to a full return to democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law in the country of Mali.

**Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP):** Mr. Chair, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this topic in the waning hours of the day and this debate.

I am deeply concerned about the conflict in Mali and the resulting instability in the region. I am also concerned about what Canada's role should be if and when this conflict escalates.

The message the government has been sending on Mali, and on Africa in general, has been rather contradictory. Unfortunately, it is consistent with the expressed mantra of the government to reduce Canada's presence on the African continent, thereby eroding Canada's effectiveness, and as a result, Canada's esteem and validity as a global actor, through disengagement.

Disengagement means less of an understanding of the issues that affect countries individually, be it on the African continent or in any other country around the world. Disengagement leaves us in a world of ignorance. This should be cause enough for concern, but disengagement also is noticed.

There may be little concern for Canada's international reputation, as is witnessed by our withdrawal from international climate treaties, our alienation of our traditional partners, and in most recent months, the rather puzzling approach to international development. The government may not concern itself with our international reputation, but Canadians do, and they do notice. Canadians understand that we live among one another within a global community.

On diplomacy, our country is stronger when it works with long-standing partners and allies and respects and encourages a dialogue with potential future partners.

*Government Orders*

On international development, we must work hard to recapture the role we once held as a global leader in international development, which has been lost through the myopic ideology of cost first and common sense later, an ideology that undermines the ability of our diplomats and our aid workers to do their jobs.

The closing of embassies on the African continent has left gaping holes in Canada's international identity, and as important, our ability to properly monitor ongoing security issues as well as human rights abuses, which are both clearly at play in Mali today.

We intervened in Libya alongside our allies but failed to anticipate the stream of mercenaries flowing out of Libya to their home countries, including northern Mali, accompanied by very high-powered weapons that are being used against others today.

As I only have three minutes, and I have only been able to begin our discussion, I will leave it at that point. Maybe at a future date we can continue this very important discussion on Mali.

● (2400)

**The Deputy Chair:** It being 12:01 a.m., pursuant to Standing Order 53(1), the committee will rise and I will leave the chair.

(Government Business No. 16 reported)

**The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin):** Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until 2 p.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 12:01 a.m.)

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