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OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, February 7, 2013

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, February 7, 2013

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*Translation*]

CANADIAN GRAIN COMMISSION

Mr. Pierre Lemieux (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32 (2) and section 4 of the User Fees Act, I have the honour to table, in both official languages, a copy of the Canadian Grain Commission's proposal to Parliament for user fees and service standards. User fees will be payable as soon as the proposal comes into force.

I look forward to hearing what my colleagues have to say about this important proposal.

* * *

[*English*]

SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' HEALTH

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 32(2), I am pleased to table on behalf of the Minister of Veterans Affairs, in both official languages, the report of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Veterans' Health. The report is entitled "Depleted Uranium and Canadian Veterans: A Review of Potential Exposure and Health Effects".

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INTERPARLIAMENTARY DELEGATIONS

Mr. Gordon Brown (Leeds—Grenville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise this morning pursuant to Standing Order 34(1). I have the honour to present to the House, in both official languages, the reports of the Canadian delegation of the Canada-United States Inter-parliamentary Group respecting its participation in the following two meetings: first, the Pacific NorthWest Economic Region, PNWER, 22nd annual summit held in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, July 15-19, 2012; second, the 66th annual meeting of the Southern Legislative Conference of the Council of State Governments held in Charleston, West Virginia, July 28 to August 1, 2012.

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the 40th report of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs in relation to the report of the Federal Electoral Boundaries Commission for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

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[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to move the following motion:

That, at the conclusion of today's debate on the opposition motion in the name of the member for Parkdale—High Park, all questions necessary to dispose of the motion be deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred to Tuesday, February 12, 2013, at the expiry of the time provided for Government Orders.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

[*English*]

PETITIONS

SEX SELECTION

Mr. Harold Albrecht (Kitchener—Conestoga, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have the honour to present a petition signed by hundreds of constituents from the Waterloo region.

The petitioners call upon the government to notice that sex-selective abortion has created a global gender imbalance causing girls to be trafficked in prostitution. They call upon Parliament to support Motion No. M-408 and condemn sex-selective abortion.

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Mr. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36, I rise today to table a petition on behalf of Larry Martin and the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace.

Business of Supply

The petition is signed by hundreds of local residents who are urging the government to demonstrate international responsibility by recommitting Canada to contribute 0.7% of GDP to overseas development and to prioritize responsive funding to NGOs that Canadians support, which have had their funding cut by CIDA.

I am pleased to table this petition this morning and look forward to the government's response.

SEX SELECTION

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have three petitions to present today on three different subjects.

The first petition is from a number of Canadians from the London and Guelph areas, almost 70 in total. The petitioners point out that Canada is a nation that has long promoted the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law. They point out that preventing the birth of baby girls through sex-selective abortion is an affront to the dignity and equality of women and girls and has denied millions of girls in Canada and throughout the world a chance to be born merely because they are girls.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to condemn discrimination against girls through sex-selective pregnancy termination.

ABORTION

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from more than 130 Canadians from the Guelph and London areas, who point out that Canada is the only nation in the western world to have no law restricting abortion and is in the company of China and North Korea in that respect.

The petitioners call upon Parliament to speedily enact legislation to deal with that.

MIGRANT WORKERS

Mr. Stephen Woodworth (Kitchener Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a petition signed by 27 of my constituents who remind Parliament that temporary foreign and seasonal workers play an important role in the economy but are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and substandard working conditions.

The petitioners call upon the Government of Canada to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

[*Translation*]

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Mr. André Bellavance (Richmond—Arthabaska, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I recently took part in a press conference in Sherbrooke organized by the diocesan council of the Eastern Townships to protest the funding cuts made to Development and Peace. The Bishop of Sherbrooke, Bishop Luc Cyr, was there, as were many others.

Basically, the petitioners asked me to present a petition calling on the government to demonstrate international responsibility by recommitting Canada to contribute 0.7% of GDP to international development assistance. They want the government to prioritize responsive funding to those NGOs that Canadians support and that

have seen their funding cut by CIDA. Finally, in the spirit of global solidarity, they want to ensure that CIDA restores the full funding amount of \$49.2 million requested by Development and Peace over the next five years.

• (1010)

[*English*]

SEX SELECTION

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am honoured to present a petition on behalf of people from Viking, in my constituency.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to condemn discrimination against females occurring through sex selective pregnancy termination. They note that CBC did a program that exposed this practice in Canada. They note that 92% of Canadians believe that sex-selective pregnancy termination should be illegal. The petitioners also pointed out that all parties in the House supported ending this practice.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to condemn discrimination against females occurring through sex selective pregnancy termination.

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QUESTIONS ON THE ORDER PAPER

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

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[*Translation*]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—PARLIAMENTARY BUDGET OFFICER

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP) moved:

That this House: (a) reaffirm the essential role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer in providing independent analysis to Parliamentarians on the state of the nation's finances, trends in the Canadian economy, and the estimates process; and (b) call on the government to: (i) extend the mandate of current Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page until his replacement is named; and (ii) support legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament.

Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Beauharnois—Salaberry.

I am pleased to rise in the House today to move this opposition motion in support of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

The position of Parliamentary Budget Officer was created in 2006 in the wake of the sponsorship scandal. Despite their promise to create an independent parliamentary budget office, the Conservatives refused to grant the PBO the same independence and the same authority as other officers of Parliament, such as the Auditor General.

Business of Supply

[English]

Our current PBO, Kevin Page, has himself asked why create a budget office and ask for independent analysis right in the legislation if we do not even want it. Why indeed?

In an unfortunate and frustrating pattern, the government has responded to the PBO's efforts for fiscal transparency by refusing to release costing estimates on a wide range of its key policy areas, including the F-35 procurement deal, G8 and G20 security costs, the contentious omnibus crime bill and the OAS cuts. Meanwhile, following its mandate, the PBO has continued to produce its own independent costing analysis in the face of limited co-operation from federal departments and harsh backlash from the Conservatives.

Last spring, Mr. Page told *The Hill Times*, "We've always tried to be fearless in terms of tackling difficult issues". While I certainly appreciate his tenacity and commitment to providing Canadians with the real costs of government policy, his job should not require so much courage. Instead, our government should be committed to ensuring that fiscal transparency and accountability are standard operating procedure here in Ottawa.

In our parliamentary system, the power of the purse is ultimately meant to rest with the House of Commons. In order for parliamentarians to be able to act responsibly on behalf of our constituents and all Canadians, we must have access to the financial costs and implications of legislation before we vote, and the current government is certainly not in the habit of providing answers.

In fact, last year, the Treasury Board directed government departments not to include details about upcoming spending cuts in their annual plans and priorities reports. Of course, having this information unavailable to MPs necessarily means that it is also unavailable to the public, a fact that raises important questions about the democratic process in our country.

How can Canadians engage with the parliamentary process that has so many real impacts on their lives if they are not given the information to do so? Would we ask a family to buy a home without knowing the cost of a mortgage? Of course not. Why should it be any different with the laws and programs that govern our lives? The bottom line is that Canadians and their MPs need more information about government spending than they are currently getting. When they are not getting the information they need from the government, an office like the PBO becomes the go-to source for financial analysis.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer plays an invaluable role in our federal government, and Canadians are facing a PBO cliff. We have heard about the fiscal cliff in the U.S. We are facing a PBO cliff here in Canada when Kevin Page's term ends on March 24.

The official opposition is deeply concerned by the lack of progress that has been made in finding our new PBO. Last week I met with the Parliamentary Librarian, who confirmed that a selection committee has yet to be formed. The firm that will be doing the head hunting for this essential position has only just been hired. Selection processes for these kinds of positions often take between six and twelve months. In fact, the selection process for our first PBO lasted eight months. It is clear that it is highly unlikely we will have a new PBO in place by the end of Mr. Page's term. It is equally

clear that the Conservatives are in no rush to ensure that the work of the PBO continues unabated during the selection process.

Unfortunately, the legislation governing the Parliamentary Budget Officer does not extend the mandate of the PBO to his employees. The legislation also fails to provide for an automatic interim process to take effect when a new PBO is sought. Instead, Canadians and their MPs must wait for an order in council appointment for even an interim PBO to be put in place.

• (1015)

Our government should be committed to fiscal transparency, and the legislation governing the Parliamentary Budget Officer should effectively support its mandate. However, the necessary political commitment to the PBO is not fully met in the existing legislation. For instance, under the current law, the Parliamentary Budget Officer serves at the pleasure of the Prime Minister, a constraint by which no other officer of Parliament is bound and one that could promise serious consequences for a PBO whose independent fiscal analysis displeased the PM.

We have seen the Conservatives engage in a consistent campaign of attacks on the credibility of Kevin Page, despite the fact that his analysis has consistently proved to be on target. The official opposition is deeply concerned that the government will attempt to appoint a new PBO who is more lapdog than watchdog. That is not what Canadians need. We need a strong, independent Parliamentary Budget Officer, not another person who talks government talking points.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer is also currently an officer of the Library of Parliament, not of Parliament itself. There have been real issues with this arrangement, including a lack of congruence between the roles of the two bodies. The official opposition has significant concerns that this issue will come to the fore should there not be an interim PBO, especially considering the fact that since the mandate of the PBO does not extend past the individual who is in that position today, the rest of his staff are considered employees of the Library of Parliament. Will these library employees be allowed to make public reports on costing and economic estimates on behalf of the PBO? Who will come before the committee, especially the finance committee, or answer questions from MPs and the media about the work of the office?

Business of Supply

The Conservatives have made a habit of attacking the PBO when he is actually acting fully within his mandate as outlined in the legislation. How will they react to public servants making public reports on the PBO's behalf, when there is no legislated mandate that extends to them? How can we address these issues and ensure that there is no gap in the crucial information for MPs and the Canadian public? The answer is simple. Extend Kevin Page's term until a replacement is found. We need a thorough and transparent process.

Over the last couple of weeks, when asked about the PBO, the Conservatives have repeatedly said that they support the ongoing existence of the office. That is hardly the same as expressing a commitment to support the office's independence or to work to improve fiscal transparency. It is very troubling.

[Translation]

Budget transparency should be paramount in our parliamentary system. Canadians and their MPs deserve to know the real costs of policy and legislation, and the PBO must have sufficient power and independence to meet this goal. It is critically important that there be no gaps in the vital work done by this office. It is especially crucial that the PBO be strengthened and supported in future. I am pleased to move the following motion:

That this House: (a) reaffirm the essential role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer in providing independent analysis to Parliamentarians on the state of the nation's finances, trends in the Canadian economy, and the estimates process; and (b) call on the government to: (i) extend the mandate of current Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page until his replacement is named; and (ii) support legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament.

• (1020)

[English]

Mr. Bernard Trotter (Etobicoke—Lakeshore, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her speech about the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Of course, she recognizes that in our Parliament, which is the Westminster system that we have inherited from the United Kingdom, it is the Crown that is responsible for making budgets, not Parliament. Parliament approves budgets that come from the Crown. I wonder if she would like to comment on that role. She seems to be saying in her remarks that the opposition members, individually, should have their fingerprints all over the budget, creating a system of what are called earmarks in the United States. Does she believe that it is an appropriate format for making budgets?

I would like to comment on another aspect and add a secondary question. To what extent are opposition members using the Parliamentary Budget Officer role for partisan purposes, as opposed to trying to clarify and use it for information?

Ms. Peggy Nash: There you have it, Mr. Speaker, for all Canadians to see.

The issue is accountability, on which the Conservatives rode into government, on which they rode into Ottawa. The notion was that there should be independent financial oversight for the good of all Canadians, because Canadians put their trust in the government and send their tax dollars here. They want to know that there is proper oversight and that those tax dollars are wisely spent.

The Conservatives rode into office on the issue of accountability. They created the position of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to

provide that independent oversight. It is right in his mandate. Now they are saying maybe not, maybe that it not a role for parliamentarians.

The whole point of having the PBO was so governments would not fudge numbers or hide their intent with deficits, with surpluses or with certain spending allotments for partisan purposes. It was to provide independent oversight. That is what we believe the PBO has done so diligently. That is why the position and the current occupant needs to be maintained until we have a new person posted through a transparent process.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for Parkdale—High Park for tabling this very important motion.

As she has pointed out to the House, one of the most significant roles and responsibilities for elected members of Parliament, whether they are on the government side or in opposition, is to scrutinize spending. We have a responsibility to make sure that taxpayers' dollars are spent appropriately.

As she is aware, both the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance have objected to the PBO delivering in his role in an effective manner. The statement made by one of the Conservative members, the member for Edmonton—St. Albert, is rather shocking. While he has commended the PBO for his valuable role in scrutinizing spending, he has stated that the fact that the data and the information could be released publicly would deter government members from seeking his services.

I wonder if the hon. member could speak to the issue of the role of the PBO and the fact that he has had to resort to the courts to get that information to make it available to all members of Parliament.

• (1025)

Ms. Peggy Nash: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Edmonton—Strathcona for her work on the government operations committee.

It has become, sadly, a hallmark of the Conservatives that they lack accountability. They use massive omnibus budget bills to ram through legislative changes without proper debate, oversight and transparency. Clearly, they want to do the same when it comes to a budget and when it comes to the spending of taxpayers' dollars.

We believe that we need transparency and accountability. In fact, we have seen that the PBO's numbers have often proven right when the government's numbers have proven to be not worth the paper they are written on. I cite the F-35 procurement.

We need accountability and oversight. I do not know what the government is afraid of.

Business of Supply

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Parkdale—High Park for moving this very important motion today.

Like many of the world's democratic countries, in 2008, Canada created an entity to ensure government accountability, in the form of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. This office, which was created by the Conservatives with the support of all parties, also ensures that parliamentarians are given accurate information about public finances.

The NDP is committed to ensuring that public funds are managed properly and is of the opinion that Canada needs a strong and independent Parliamentary Budget Officer. That is why it is imperative that hon. members support the motion moved by my colleague from Parkdale—High Park, which states:

That this House: (a) reaffirm the essential role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer in providing independent analysis to Parliamentarians on the state of the nation's finances, trends in the Canadian economy, and the estimates process; and (b) call on the government to: (i) extend the mandate of current Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page until his replacement is named; and (ii) support legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament.

Passed in 2006 and supported by all parties, Bill C-2, the Federal Accountability Act, provides for the creation of the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer, whose role is to provide MPs and parliamentary committees with objective analyses concerning the state of the nation's finances, trends in the national economy, and the financial cost of proposals under consideration by either House.

Under this legislation, the Parliamentary Budget Officer is also responsible for conducting research on the country's economy and finances, as well as on the government's estimates. On March 14, 2008, the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons announced that Kevin Page would be the first person appointed to the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer of Canada for a term of five years. In my opinion, Mr. Page has done a remarkable job of fulfilling the mandate he was given with a team of only 14 people. In the United States, the team is made up of 200 people.

He shed light on some outrageous inaccuracies in government information presented to parliamentarians and Canadians, such as the real cost of the F-35s and the sustainability of the guaranteed income supplement and old age security programs. Mr. Page also proved that Canadians trusted him to carry out his duties and to inform the public about the state of the economy and the manner in which public funds are spent.

Over the course of his brief mandate, the Parliamentary Budget Officer has released over 150 analysis reports, with a budget of only \$2.8 million. These reports include a few key reports that helped shed light on important financial details that were nowhere to be found in the government's publications.

One of these key reports was An Estimate of the Fiscal Impact of Canada's Proposed Acquisition of the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter. This report revealed that no competitive bid process was held for the F-35s, and that acquiring these jets would not cost \$16 billion U.S., but \$29.3 billion U.S., nearly double the amount the Conservatives had announced. That is very shameful.

In 2012, the Parliamentary Budget Officer also released a report on old age security, in which he showed that the old age security system was perfectly sustainable, as our NDP colleagues have said time and again. This conclusion was echoed by the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions, which proved that there was no financial basis for the Conservative government's decision to increase the age of eligibility for old age security from 65 to 67.

In addition to these sporadic reports, the Parliamentary Budget Officer submits periodic reports to Parliament on the country's long-term financial viability. This is an important type of study that helps ensure that young Canadians, like me and other members in the House, do not inherit an economic mess.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer also pointed out that the Department of Finance was unable to specify the intergenerational impact of the budgetary changes, and God knows there have been many budgetary changes here, for example in Bill C-38 and Bill C-45. That is rather worrisome, since another budget will be tabled, and we have no idea what to expect.

• (1030)

These reports are just a few examples of the outstanding work that the Parliamentary Budget Officer and his team have done since the start of his term. In order to reinforce the exceptional work that he has done, we want to ensure that the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer can continue its work uninterrupted.

To that end, we want to see Kevin Page's term extended until a replacement is found. We believe that interrupting his term could severely impact the government's obligation to be accountable. This obligation is all the more crucial given that the government will soon be tabling its annual budget.

For the sake of accountability, it is also crucial that parliamentarians continue to benefit from the financial expertise of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Under no circumstances can we support the elimination of this office. Can the Conservative government confirm in this House that the PBO will be replaced by the end of his term? If not, can the Conservative government assure us that Mr. Page's term will be extended? I have my doubts, because the Conservatives, it seems, have plenty to hide.

This motion also seeks the government's support for legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament. The Conservatives have repeatedly attacked Mr. Page because he has constantly pointed out their fiscal mismanagement in various areas. This should come as no surprise, though, given that the Conservatives attack anyone who dares disagree with them.

For example, the Conservatives got rid of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy because its reports and recommendations were inconsistent with the government's objectives. It was a purely partisan decision, one that was incompetent and irresponsible.

Business of Supply

These constant political attacks indicate the need for a strong, independent Parliamentary Budget Officer. The NDP also wants the selection process for the new PBO to be open and transparent. It may be difficult for the Conservatives to be transparent, but we can always hope.

Many Canadians are worried that the government will not fill the position or will appoint someone who is unable, or unwilling, to do the work as clearly, concisely and independently as Mr. Page has done.

It is therefore imperative to remove any ambiguity and inconsistency regarding this position, which is provided for in the Federal Accountability Act. In fact, according to David Good, a professor at the University of Victoria, the confusion resulting from legislation serves only to:

...increase partisanship and the scoring of political points rather than channelling substantive information to elevate the level of debate to assist parliamentarians in the scrutiny of the budget and the estimates.

As a member of the Library of Parliament staff, the Parliamentary Budget Officer does not have the same independence as officers of Parliament. As my colleague said earlier, the Conservatives have sometimes asked the PBO not to table certain reports, which meant that the information in question was not available to parliamentarians—we, the MPs—or to the general public.

Making the PBO an officer of Parliament would give Parliament access to an independent research capacity, thereby improving its access to important information.

The Conservatives claim that the Parliamentary Budget Officer is impartial, so then why are they opposed to the PBO becoming an independent officer of Parliament?

In closing, I urge all members of this House to vote in favour of the motion moved by the hon. member for Parkdale—High Park because Canada needs a strong and independent Parliamentary Budget Officer who will help to ensure the sound management of public funds.

It is important that taxpayers have confidence in the government and in all members of this House and that we assure them that expenditures and revenues are managed in a fair and responsible manner. Canada needs a Parliamentary Budget Officer who will let the facts speak for themselves so that they are not interpreted in one way or another.

The PBO successfully fulfilled his mandate. All parties supported the creation of the Parliamentary Budget Officer position and, if the current government votes against this motion, it will be admitting that it no longer considers fiscal accountability to be a priority. We in the NDP want transparency.

• (1035)

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish to congratulate the hon. member for Beauharnois—Salaberry on her great speech. She is very gracious and works very hard in the House. The voters of Beauharnois—Salaberry are well represented.

She talked about the many blunders made by this Conservative government. As we know, at the end of every year, the Department

of Finance releases a report on financial results. For the past 20 years, it has compared NDP, Conservative and Liberal governments. For the past 20 years, the NDP has always come out on top thanks to our wise financial governance and our ability to balance budgets and reduce debt.

So, the NDP are better than the Conservatives when it comes to fiscal management. Does the member think that that is a valid reason for the Conservatives to shut down the office that acted independently to keep an eye on the nation's finances? After all, the Conservatives are not very good at managing finances.

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Burnaby—New Westminster for the question.

That is exactly what the years have proven. Various assessments and analyses comparing NDP and Conservative governments have shown that NDP governments know how to balance their budgets. The NDP are so transparent and care so much about the sound management of public funds that they insist that a completely independent officer of Parliament be allowed to continue that work in order to ensure that taxpayers' money is well managed, well spent and properly distributed.

I understand that the Conservatives have some reservations about this, because they are completely partisan, they want to hide information and they want to keep on cultivating ignorance among Canadians.

On this side of the House, we want to restore people's confidence in the role of parliamentarians. We want people to continue to engage in the democratic process. I believe that this is one of tools we can use to ensure that the activities of Parliament remain transparent and fair.

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): I thank my dear colleague for her very interesting speech.

Since being appointed, the Parliamentary Budget Officer has asked questions to ensure that there is sound fiscal management in this country, which obviously bothers the Conservatives and the government. Every time the Parliamentary Budget Officer comes out with figures or makes a statement, the Conservatives contradict him. Why are the Conservatives doing this?

What can we do to give the Parliamentary Budget Officer the powers he needs to continue his excellent work?

• (1040)

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Pontiac.

That is a pertinent question. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has shown great courage and tenacity. He has demanded that the government hand over crucial information that he needs to properly prepare his reports.

If the Parliamentary Budget Officer were to become an independent officer of Parliament, he could do his job without the government constantly putting up roadblocks. If he were completely independent, as we are asking in our motion today, it could make the PBO's job easier because he would not be constantly hindered by the Conservatives.

Business of Supply

[English]

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board and for Western Economic Diversification, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time today with the member of Parliament for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, who I might add does an excellent job representing his constituents here in Ottawa. He also serves with me on the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, where he makes a big contribution.

I welcome the opportunity to stand in this place to speak to the role of the non-partisan Parliamentary Budget Officer in promoting accountability in government. Our government is committed to increasing accountability. Accountability is the foundation of Canada's system of responsible government. It is key to assuring Parliament and Canadians that public resources are used efficiently and effectively.

That is why we introduced the Federal Accountability Act as our first piece of legislation, the most sweeping anti-corruption legislation following 13 years of Liberal scandals and mismanagement. The act provides Canadians with the assurance that the powers entrusted in the government are being exercised in the public interest. That act included a very important innovation: the creation of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Parliamentarians and parliamentary committees need access to independent analysis and advice on economic and fiscal issues in order to better hold government to account on its decisions. The Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer was created to improve economic and fiscal information to parliamentarians and inform discussions of economic and fiscal matters in Parliament. It was this government's Federal Accountability Act that gave the Parliamentary Budget Officer clear mandates.

First, the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to provide independent analysis to the Senate and the House of Commons concerning the state of the nation's finances, the estimates of the government and trends in the national economy. Second, the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to undertake research into the nation's finances and the economy at the request of the following committees: the Standing Committee on Finance, the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and the Senate Standing Committee on National Finance. Third, the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to undertake research into the estimates of government at the request of a committee that is mandated to consider them. Finally, the Parliamentary Budget Officer is mandated to estimate the financial cost of any proposal that relates to a matter over which Parliament has jurisdiction.

A member, a committee of the Senate or the House of Commons, or a committee of both Houses may ask the Parliamentary Budget Officer to provide these estimates. The position of the non-partisan Parliamentary Budget Officer was designed in the context of Canada's parliamentary system. In our system it is the responsibility of the government to prepare its budget and policy agenda, and the responsibility of Parliament to hold the government to account for its actions and resulting outcomes. The Office of Parliamentary Budget Officer was established to support parliamentarians in carrying out this responsibility after the previous Liberal government's disregard for transparency.

As currently constituted, the Parliamentary Budget Officer is part of the Library of Parliament. Both the parliamentary budget office and the Library of Parliament as a whole are fully independent from the government in their operation and funding. It is Parliament, not the government, that sets the Parliamentary Budget Officer's funding level. As such, the officer is accountable to Parliament. Accountable government is important to Canadians. That is why our Conservative government created this office and will ensure that a credible, non-partisan replacement is found for Parliament to consider.

However, our commitment to accountability does not stop there. An accountable government also makes sure that Canadians' hard-earned tax dollars are not wasted. It makes sure tax dollars are invested responsibly in effective programs that meet the needs of Canadians. In fact, the sound stewardship of Canadians' tax dollars, ensuring value for money, is one of our Conservative government's top priorities. That is why, for example, our government took historic action to reform the pensions of members of Parliament and public servants. We are the first government to tackle the difficult task of aligning both public sector and MP pension contributions with what Canadian citizens expect in the private sector.

• (1045)

Thanks to our action, contribution rates for public service employees and MPs will be moving to a 50-50 cost-sharing model by the year 2017. Once fully implemented, MPs' contributions would nearly quadruple, from \$11,000 to over \$38,000 a year. Moreover, the age at which MPs can retire with an unreduced pension would also rise, from 55 to 65, by January 1, 2016. Newly hired public servants would begin collecting their pensions at age 65 instead of 60. As a result, over the next five years these measures would save taxpayers over \$2.6 billion.

This is the right thing to do and the fair thing to do. I am proud to be part of a government that took the bull by the horns and made this landmark decision.

Let there be no doubt. This government is committed to improving accountability and the stewardship of Canadian tax dollars. We have proven that, not with words, but with actions. Our record is clear. The measures we have taken help provide Canadians with the open and honest government they deserve, one that acts transparently and ensures values for money and demonstrates accountability.

Our government believes that the mandated role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is capable of achieving these goals without alteration.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I heard the member opposite describe the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer and how important it is. We have found his role very valuable, for example, in exposing the true cost of the F-35 procurement, which we would not have learned about if it had not been for the PBO.

We are about to head into a budget cycle now, just as the PBO's term is ending.

Business of Supply

Now the Conservatives are claiming that the PBO is being “partisan”, to use their word. We do not believe that. If they believe the position is partisan, why have they fought against creating a fully independent PBO, a position of a fully independent officer of Parliament like the Auditor General? Would he answer that for the House?

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would point out that it was our government that created the parliamentary budget office. We are committed to maintaining that office. We are also committed to ensuring that Parliament has the opportunity to look at a credible and non-partisan replacement.

I should point out that the Library of Parliament has had a research wing for over 48 years. That research wing has helped Parliament, providing members of Parliament and parliamentarians with information necessary for them to do their job. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that the parliamentary budget office and officer would also fall under the Library of Parliament.

• (1050)

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to follow up the parliamentary secretary's point that it was the Conservative Party of Canada that committed to having a Parliamentary Budget Officer and our government that created the position.

Would he care to explain why the Liberal Party of Canada or the New Democratic Party of Canada never brought forward the concept of implementing a budgetary officer to review the finances of the Government of Canada when the former was in power?

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Speaker, I cannot speak on behalf of the opposition parties. I do not know why they failed to create this position.

However, I can tell members why we created the position. We created the position because during 13 years of Liberal governments, we saw unprecedented scandals. We saw the sponsorship scandal where hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars went into the pockets of the Liberals' friends. That corruption we simply cannot tolerate. That is why our Conservative government is determined to bring in accountability.

We brought in the Federal Accountability Act, the most sweeping anti-corruption legislation in Canadian history. The position of the Parliamentary Budget Officer was part of the Federal Accountability Act. That is why, after having seen these scandals and mismanagement by previous governments, we think it is so important to have someone there to ensure that this does not happen again.

Mr. Tyrone Benskin (Jeanne-Le Ber, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am hearing a lot of back-patting from the member on the other side, that “We did this, we did that”. If the Conservatives are so keen on the Parliamentary Budget Officer position, why have they spent so much energy fighting the Parliamentary Budget Officer on virtually every file he has tried to work on, such as the F-35 and our getting information on that? Why have they fought so hard to keep that information away from parliamentarians and Canadians?

Mr. Andrew Saxton: Mr. Speaker, if the hon. member believes that telling the facts is back-patting, then we are happy to be patting ourselves on the back because we did bring in the Parliamentary Budget Officer and the Federal Accountability Act. As I mentioned,

it is the most sweeping anti-corruption legislation in Canadian history.

As I also mentioned, for 48 years the Library of Parliament has served members of Parliament. Its employees did not grandstand or hold regular press conferences; they simply did their job and served Parliament. That is what the Library of Parliament has done in the past and that is what we expect the Library of Parliament and the Parliamentary Budget Officer to do in the future.

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the President of the Treasury Board, not only for his great presentation and understanding but also, quite honestly, for the leadership he shows on behalf of the government at the public accounts committee, which I am pleased to be part of.

It is indeed an honour today to rise and speak regarding budgetary and expenditure reporting as they relate to the role of the parliamentary budget office in promoting accountability in government.

It has been mentioned, and I am sure that we will hear this more than once today, that it was our Conservative government that introduced the Federal Accountability Act. Through that act we created the non-partisan parliamentary budget office, after more than a decade of concerns across the country about the former Liberal government and how it was operating and looking after expenditures, and the boondoggles that followed that.

Canadians want to be confident that the Government of Canada is actually working in their best interest. They expect those in elected office and public servants to manage their existing tax dollars wisely, rather than taxing and spending even more, as some of the parties across the way would do. It is like one's family or one's business, because the Canadian people want us to uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct, not unlike any good company or small business in my riding of Lambton—Kent—Middlesex.

Why do we do that? It is because we want to instill confidence in Canadians, which means that government must be open about what it has achieved. It must assure Canadians and parliamentarians that the right controls are in place and must provide them with the information they need to judge its performance. That is exactly what we have done.

Confidence is about trust. It is about the trust we place in our elected officials and public service employees to act in the best interests of Canadians. It is a trust that must be earned every day. Earning that trust starts with making government more accountable. Being more accountable means that governments must be honest, open and fair.

The result has been our Conservative government's Federal Accountability Act. It signalled dramatic changes in how federal politics and government works in the country.

When it comes to reporting to Parliament, we have followed up with a number of measures to improve accountability and to increase transparency. We have developed a comprehensive regime to report and review both planned and actual expenditures at the whole of government level and departmental level.

Business of Supply

At the whole of government review, this regime includes planning information released through the budget, the estimates and financial results released in the monthly "Fiscal Monitor" and the Public Accounts of Canada.

At the departmental level, there are reports on plans and priorities, the actual expenditure information that is contained in the departmental performance reports and the quarterly financial reports.

We are continuing to provide Canadians and Parliament with the information they need to hold government to account. For example, we have made improvements to the estimates document to provide more meaningful information to parliamentarians, trying to make these complex documents more user friendly.

The Treasury Board Secretariat has worked with the departments and agencies to try to improve and make changes in that system. This has resulted in more accessible information describing the nature of transactions, including the offset of new spending requirements through the use of existing spending authorities.

We have made other changes, including the provision of clearer summary tables and a presentation of gross funding requirements for each organization and an explanation of the funds available to offset new spending requirements.

We talked about this at the public accounts committee and how we might make the reporting and the resulting volumes of material more understandable to the average Canadian.

• (1055)

Members understand the task in front of us. It is a very difficult one, even for those folks who are very much involved in the business of auditing and accounting. We are working with them. We want to make these as user-friendly as possible. We want to do this by using a standardized approach to results-based reporting. We have worked closely with the departments in order to present an annual performance summary, balancing successes and challenges.

Parliament actually has a number of tools at its disposal to obtain information to access the government's actions. Treasury Board Secretariat is committed to continuing to ensure transparency and diligence in providing what it can. As members know, the secretariat supports and shares the Parliamentary Budget Officer's interest in providing parliamentarians and the public with more timely and easy to use data on departmental spending.

That is why the government has taken many actions on this front. These improvements allow all hon. members to get a better understanding of the government's spending plans in order to hold government to account. However, we are not only providing information to parliamentarians. We are also providing that information to Canadians.

Members have all heard the saying that information is power. By making information accessible, the government is also empowering Canadians to hold the government to account. In fact, Canada is a leader in providing accessible information to citizens. We are one of the first countries around the world to enact access to information legislation, which goes back almost three decades. That is why, since coming to office in 2006, our government has been working hard to

throw open the doors of government and make information available not only to parliamentarians but also to Canadians.

For example, in 2006, as I mentioned before, this government significantly expanded the coverage through the Federal Accountability Act, which contained the most extensive amendments to the Access to Information Act since the act came into force in 1983. Most importantly, it broadened the reach of access to information to more public institutions. In April 2007, for example, five foundations and five agents of Parliament came under the act's provisions. All told, the Federal Accountability Act added 69 additional public institutions to the list of those covered by legislation. In fact, as a result, there are now 250 public organizations subject to the access to information law. One might be surprised by that large amount. The services these institutions provide are wide-ranging, far-reaching and involve many activities and services that are important not only to parliamentarians but also to all Canadians.

Ensuring greater transparency and accountability goes beyond expanding just the coverage of the act to more institutions. The government recently made it a requirement for all departments and agencies that are subject to the Access to Information Act to post summaries of their complete access to information requests online. Each summary includes the requested number, a summary of the completed requests and the number of pages disclosed. I am pleased to say that the departments, agencies and crown corporations are complying with this new requirement.

The government's commitment to Canadians is clear. It is to increase the accountability of government. I am proud to say we have committed and every day we continue to follow through. Our government is confident that the current structure of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is capable of providing quality non-partisan analysis.

• (1100)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague opposite for his speech on today's opposition motion.

My question is quite straightforward. We all know that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has an extremely important role. Will my Conservative colleagues support our motion?

[*English*]

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague across the way for her question. It was fairly straightforward and I would suspect that at the end of the day she knows the answer is that we would not be.

The position of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is one of the Library of Parliament. It is totally independent of government. I think that the last thing we would want to see happen is to make that office come under the jurisdiction of government. It is under the jurisdiction of the Library of Parliament, which is independent. That sets aside and takes away any influence from the governing party.

Quite honestly, it is there through the Accountability Act of 2006 because government had to be cleaned. Corruption was happening under the previous government and that is why we do not want the office accountable to the government.

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Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is important. The Prime Minister talked about having this independent body, the Parliamentary Budget Officer. We have the expectation in the Liberal Party that the office would be treated with respect. We have not seen that.

Just last year the Prime Minister, when he was overseas, said that there was this crisis with seniors' pensions. We all remember that. Then the government increases the age limit from 65 to 67, in terms of Canadians being able to retire. The Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues were saying that there was a crisis with our seniors. The Parliamentary Budget Officer made it very clear that the crisis really was not there. The government was exaggerating. The government was not necessarily implying it but maybe the government was not being straightforward and honest. There was no need for us to increase the age from 65 to 67.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer does provide a great service to the House of Commons, and—

• (1105)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. I would remind hon. members that many hon. members wish to participate in the question and comment period. We normally have five minutes for that. I would ask members to try to keep their questions and comments concise, and similarly on the response side, so that more hon. members will have the opportunity to ask questions.

The hon. member for Lambton—Kent—Middlesex.

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Speaker, I am not sure what is the best way to answer that.

I find that quite a question coming from the Liberal Party, which was actually the reason why we had to bring in the Accountability Act. We needed to have some oversight on spending, because the Liberal Party had ripped the Canadian people off for hundreds of millions of dollars to feed their friends.

The Accountability Act and the Office of the Parliamentary Budgetary Officer make sure that we spend our money properly, and that will continue under this office.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his speech on today's opposition motion.

Just a reminder, we both got elected in 2006. The Accountability Act was one of our first pieces of legislation, and rightfully so, as illustrated by the member. It was in reaction to 13 years of Liberal mismanagement of the public finances at the government level. We did that under a minority government.

Why was it important for us to follow through on the promise we made to the people in the 2006 election?

Mr. Bev Shipley: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Burlington who is an important cog in the wheel of the finance committee.

I do not think it matters what party it is. We made commitments during the election. The election came about and Canadians spoke. We made a commitment to bring forward the Accountability Act,

which would deal with the issues of reporting, being accountable and transparency. We said we would do it, and actually—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Resuming debate.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I rise today to speak to the motion and to support the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

I must say I was surprised to hear the Conservative member speak of fiscal and financial mismanagement under the previous Liberal government. It was the previous Liberal government that inherited a \$43 billion deficit, eliminated that deficit and then introduced consecutive surplus budgets that took \$100 billion off the national debt.

It is this Conservative government that inherited the best fiscal situation of any incoming government in the history of Canada, a \$13 billion surplus, spent at three times the rate of inflation and put us into a deficit, even before the effects of the downturn, and has now added well over \$100 billion to the national debt.

We are here today to speak about the Parliamentary Budget Officer and the importance of that role. I will be splitting my time with my colleague, the exceptional member for Random—Burin—St. George's.

This morning I want to use my limited time to speak to the need of a strong and independent Parliamentary Budget Officer who has both the power and the resources required to shine some much needed light on the state of the government's finances. I will speak to some of the accomplishments of the current PBO, Kevin Page, and the very able team that he has brought together in his office. I want to speak about how these accomplishments have earned the praise of Canadians across the political spectrum and have made a difference in terms of strengthening the work we do in the House. Finally, I want to talk about some of the roadblocks that Mr. Page has faced from the Conservative government, and how he has joined a growing list of credible and selfless public servants who dared to speak truth to power and were attacked mercilessly by the Conservatives for doing so.

The single most important power that we have as parliamentarians is the power of the purse. The government cannot spend money on its own. It must receive permission from Parliament to do so. Our most important responsibility as parliamentarians is to control the purse strings of the government and to scrutinize the government's spending.

There is a growing imbalance between the responsibilities of parliamentarians and the resources we have to do our jobs. The government has hundreds of thousands of civil servants to do its work, but the average MP only has a handful of staff, perhaps four or five people, to serve their entire constituency as well as scrutinize government and government spending. That is what the PBO's role is, to help us fulfill the mandate we have as members of Parliament.

The PBO has a mandate to provide us with independent analysis of the state of the nation's finances, trends in the national economy, estimates of government spending and, on our request, estimates of any costs that fall under our jurisdiction. That office has become indispensable, both to us as parliamentarians and to Canadians, who want to know what their government is doing with their money.

Business of Supply

Earlier this week the *Globe and Mail* summed up the need for a strong, independent PBO as follows:

With better information to scrutinize the financial decisions of the government the PBO enhances the ability of Parliamentarians to hold the government to account. Moreover, the PBO provides a source of credible cost estimates for new initiatives proposed by Parliamentarians, allowing them to contribute more to policy debates. The government has the vast and deep resources of the Ministry of Finance for these tasks; the PBO helps Parliament keep pace.

The PBO has done some extraordinary work in a fairly short period of time in helping us hold the government to account. In 2008, the PBO was the first to come out with the true costs of the Conservatives' mission in Afghanistan. In 2009, the Minister of Finance was trying to tell Canadians that there would be no deficit and the government would in fact post \$100 million surplus. It was the PBO who first told us that not only would there be a deficit but that the Conservatives had created a structural deficit, and the deficit that year would be close to \$50 billion. It ended up being \$55.6 billion.

In 2010, it was the PBO who told Canadians the true cost of the Conservatives' prison agenda. When the Conservative government tried to hide the cost of its major initiatives from Canadians, it was the PBO who told Parliament what financial information should exist and where it should be able to find it. It was in 2011 when the PBO first told Canadians the true extent of how the cost of the F-35s had spiralled out of control.

•(1110)

Last year it was the PBO who confirmed that the OAS program was fully sustainable on its own, without any cuts to benefits. This fact was supported by economists at the OECD and by people in the minister's own department.

It was the PBO who told Canadians that the gap in health spending between the provinces and the federal government is growing and how federal cuts to health spending have led to structural deficits for the provinces. Earlier this year, it was the PBO who told Canadians how the Conservative government is cutting front-line programs while letting overhead back-office costs grow, exactly the opposite of what the Conservatives promised in the budget.

I should point out that Mr. Page does not do his work alone. He works with a strong team that includes two assistant PBOs, Mostafa Askari and Sahir Khan, as well as senior staff Chris Matier, Jason Jacques and Peter Weltman, and a small team of analysts and support staff. These members of his team are exceptional public servants.

Mr. Page and his team have earned considerable praise from Canadians from coast to coast to coast and across the political spectrum. Even right-of-centre Canadians have chimed in to credit the PBO and to chastise the Conservative government for mistreating Mr. Page. Conservative commentator Ian Lee recently wrote, "...Kevin Page must be celebrated for ensuring the independence of the PBO against a full-court press by the political and bureaucratic elites".

Even the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, which does not like government spending of any kind it seems sometimes has said that the PBO provides great value for the taxpayer. The director of the federation recently said, "If government would be more forthcoming

with public information, Kevin Page and his crew would not be necessary. But it's been proven they've turned out to be very necessary to our democracy, almost indispensable".

When the Auditor General came out with his report on the F-35s, the Canadian Taxpayer Federation issued a press release entitled "AG Report on F-35 Underlines Need for Fully Independent Parliamentary Budget Officer". This is what the director had to say in the press release: "Canadians need the straight facts on government expenses such as the F-35, and the Parliamentary Budget Officer provided straight facts when the generals, the ministers and the government were providing nothing but spin and baffle-gab".

The Conservative record on the PBO is shameless. When the position of the PBO was first created, it had the support of all parties in the House. It has proven effective and has provided Parliament and all Canadians with credible information to which Canadians have a right. Unfortunately, the Conservatives have shown that they can be incredibly thin-skinned and petty when their efforts to conceal and misinform are revealed.

The reality is that the Conservatives have a significant history of attacking public servants who do their jobs and speak truth to power. In recent weeks, we have heard statements by Conservative cabinet ministers, including the Minister of Finance, attacking the PBO and his work. They are almost quasi-personal attacks. The President of the Treasury Board has suggested that the PBO has no right to consider cuts to government spending. The President of the Treasury Board said, "When you look at the words in his mandate—the finances, the estimates and the trends in the national economy—it's not about money not spent, it's about money spent". What a ludicrous statement.

The finance committee suggested that the PBO was only supposed to be a sounding board for the government. What the Minister of Finance is describing is not a watchdog; it is a lapdog.

The government has attacked a number of public servants, and it is a long list: Colonel Pat Stogran; Richard Colvin; Chief Superintendent Marty Cheliak, director general of the Canadian firearms program; Linda Keen; Peter Tinsley; Paul Kennedy; Adrian Measner; Munir Sheikh; Steve Sullivan and Rémy Beauregard. These are all public servants who have done their jobs, fulfilled their mandates and spoken truth to Canadians, spoken truth to Parliament and spoken truth to the Conservative government. Their job is to speak truth to power, and they have been vilified and attacked and demonized and marginalized by the Conservative government.

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•(1115)

With budget 2013 expected in the coming months, perhaps on March 26, which would be just after Mr. Page's term expires, it is important that the position of the PBO not become vacant. The government should extend Mr. Page's term until the summer to provide enough time to secure a strong, competent successor. Mr. Page has publicly indicated that he would be willing to accept a short-term extension to his term.

In the meantime, let us make sure that we keep Mr. Page doing what he is doing well, which is providing Parliament and Canadians with the truth about government finances in Canada.

Mr. James Lunney (Nanaimo—Alberni, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I just wanted to reflect the fact that the member for Kings—Hants started with selective reflections on the legacy of the previous Liberal government. He reflected on how it inherited a \$43-billion deficit and turned it into a surplus.

I would like to remind the member, who seems to be exercising selective memory, that under the Mulroney government, the interest rates were at double digits. I had a mortgage at 16% in that era. Paying the public debt at that time, under those interest rates, was an extraordinary burden. It was the Mulroney government that actually took action by bringing in what was admittedly an unpopular tax, the GST, which brought in \$35 billion in revenues, and negotiated free trade, which brought in hundreds of thousands of jobs. The Liberal contribution was to slash transfers to the provinces, including health care, putting the provinces in an unstable position.

•(1120)

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Speaker, I very much appreciate the question. I have said publicly that every government makes fundamental changes to the economy that make a difference. The Mulroney government, in bringing in the GST and free trade, certainly helped significantly to grow the Canadian economy and strengthen the treasury, which helped enable fiscal management under Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien. They really seized the issue of the deficit, worked on it with all parties, and effectively paid down and eliminated it. They made tough decisions and put the country back on track.

Recently I was trying to figure out what the current Conservative government had done to try to make a difference. I could only find one significant policy change it made, and that was in budget 2006, which brought in 40-year, no-down-payment, U.S.-style mortgages, which have led to unprecedented housing and personal debt bubbles. I guess every government can be credited with making structural policy changes.

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I was a voter during the time of the sponsorship scandal, and I know from lots of conversations I had with people that voters were disgusted. It raised the level of cynicism among the Canadian electorate very high. As a response, in the 38th Parliament, Ed Broadbent introduced a seven-point plan to clean up government, which eventually became the Federal Accountability Act in 2006. Unlike the other two parties, which tried to use the issue of government scandal to raise the cynicism of the Canadian electorate, we had practical solutions.

Despite not taking action for 13 years, does the Liberal Party now support making the PBO a full officer of Parliament?

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Speaker, I have been clear that I support the PBO being made a full officer of Parliament.

To the member's point, I served in Paul Martin's cabinet at that time as Minister of Public Works. I was there during the time of the Gomery commission, which was appointed by a sitting government. The hon. member will read in Justice Gomery's report that he credits the government by saying that it was a remarkable statement of political courage that a sitting government would appoint a judicial inquiry into its own actions and those of its party.

That is the kind of openness, transparency and accountability that led to the Liberal government introducing accountability measures that were unprecedented and that actually made a significant difference.

Let us be very clear. It was not the Liberal government that tried to sweep something under the carpet. We tackled it, and we did what was right on behalf of Canadians and taxpayers.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, one of the problems with this place is that instead of members asking questions to the member for Kings—Hants on the subject at hand, they go back and try to reinvent history. My question really is on the subject at hand.

How important is it for Canadians, not just for us in this House, to have independent parliamentary officers who, on behalf of Parliament, can do the kind of reviews the Parliamentary Budget Officer has been doing? What does it mean to our democracy and our country?

Hon. Scott Brison: Mr. Speaker, I will relate a specific experience we had with the F-35s. The House of Commons finance committee was seeking the true cost of the F-35s. Members of the committee were told that it would be perhaps \$9 billion. Then we were told that it was \$16 billion, and when the Parliamentary Budget Officer told us that it could be \$29 billion, we were told that this was fundamentally wrong. In fact, it was during the election. If we even questioned the cost of the F-35s, we were accused of being against the military. Our patriotism was questioned as well as our commitment to Canada's role in the world. It had nothing to do with that. We needed the facts.

Conservative members of Parliament are also well served by the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Regardless of party, whether a member on the government side or in opposition, members have the same fiduciary responsibility to Canadians and taxpayers to do their jobs and know the cost, and that is what the PBO does.

•(1125)

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to speak today in support of the opposition day motion, which states:

Business of Supply

That this House: (a) reaffirm the essential role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer in providing independent analysis to Parliamentarians on the state of the nation's finances, trends in the Canadian economy, and the estimates process; and (b) call on the government to: (i) extend the mandate of current Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page until his replacement is named; and (ii) support legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament.

The Liberal Party supports the work of the Parliamentary Budget Officer and I think that is well known throughout the country as we have listened to Mr. Page take a responsible position in terms of being conscientious and looking closely at the expenditures of the government. The political stripe of the government in question does not matter. The role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is meant to be one who examines how money is spent when we consider it is taxpayer money.

We previously tabled a motion at committee to extend Mr. Page's term and to continue to call for the parliamentary budget officer to be made a full, independent officer of Parliament.

At the heart of today's debate is the question of fiscal accountability. In 2006 the same Conservative government, filled with a moral sense that clearly no longer burdens it, introduced the Federal Accountability Act. The Liberals supported the increased accountability called for in the act, which is why we cannot now sit idly by while the same Conservative government discredits the very institution it created.

The cornerstone of the act was the creation of a parliamentary budget officer through an amendment to the Parliament of Canada Act. The act formally defined the parliamentary budget officer as an officer of the Library of Parliament and granted free and timely access to government information. In addition, the Federal Accountability Act established that the PBO's mandate would be to:

—provide independent analysis to the Senate and the House of Commons on the state of the nation's finances, the government's estimates and trends in the Canadian economy; and upon request from a committee or parliamentarian, to estimate the financial cost of any proposal for matters over which Parliament has jurisdiction.

On March 25, 2008, the Conservative government appointed Kevin Page as the first ever parliamentary budget officer and from the outset Mr. Page took his job seriously. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that he continues to excel in his role, ensuring accurate economic information and analysis are available to the House of Commons so members of Parliament from all stripes have some facts to compare to the questionable statements that are made by the Minister of Finance.

Sadly for Canadian taxpayers, after coming to the realization that the Parliamentary Budget Officer was unwilling to accept, without question, directions from the Prime Minister and his finance minister, it became clear that the government would stop at nothing to discredit the Parliamentary Budget Officer and the office itself. It seems that seven years in, the government is doing everything in its power to avoid being accountable to the Canadian taxpayer.

Shockingly, the finance minister has even attempted to reduce the importance of the role of the PBO to a "sounding board" for the Prime Minister's Office. Worse, he accused Mr. Page of not doing his job and "wandering off and going in other places". Although unbecoming of a finance minister of Canada, the constant attacks to the credibility of this vital parliamentary office are undeniable and

inexcusable. While the finance minister was busy denying Canadians the right to fiscal transparency, Mr. Page was fighting an uphill battle against the Conservative government for accountability.

• (1130)

That is why we are concerned that as Mr. Page's remarkable service to his country comes to an end, it seems the government is delaying in finding a replacement for him. With Mr. Page's last days as the PBO fast approaching and no obvious process to hire a replacement under way, I am worried that the Conservatives are using stall tactics to silence the Parliamentary Budget Office once and for all.

These types of stall tactics would not be uncharacteristic of the government. This is the same government that has often refused to share the vital information, the financial data, which Mr. Page requires to do the job he is mandated to do, in an effort to try to prevent the PBO from keeping Parliament informed.

After the Conservatives spent the last four years doing nothing but attacking the person integrity of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, it comes as no surprise that there is not exactly a bevy of eager candidates lining up to fill his shoes, which is all the more reason why the government should have started the hiring process months ago.

According to Don Drummond, a former senior official at Finance Canada who was instrumental in hiring Mr. Page as part of the 2008 hiring panel, it will be even harder to fill the position this time, given the lawsuit the PBO is currently involved in with federal departments over documents.

When the government finally puts out its hiring ad, what exactly should it list as important job requirements? The individual must be able to withstand daily personal attacks, or previous experience not offering professional opinions that contradict the Conservative Party of Canada Ideological objectives? Mr. Page himself considers the role of the PBO to be a career ender in the public service.

Furthermore, the Parliamentary Budget Officer functions under the Library of Parliament, instead of being granted the full independence of other watchdogs, such as the Auditor General.

In the words of Mr. Page:

In watchdog parlance, I am appointed by the person (the prime minister) who I am supposed to watch...I work at 'pleasure' and can be dismissed 'without cause'.

It is completely unreasonable to expect a parliamentary watchdog to function if he or she can be fired for criticizing his or her boss.

I appeal to those in the Conservative government who once favoured transparency over the prime ministerial cone of silence. The vote on the motion will prove once and for all if there are any Conservatives who still champion transparency or if their introduction of the Parliamentary Budget Officer was merely a political ploy that they never expected to function as well as it does today.

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It is clear that the work that Mr. Page has been doing, and is continuing to do, is work that then Conservatives never thought would lead to criticism of their actions. Otherwise, they would be more supportive of the Parliamentary Budget Officer and they would accept and respect the position that he holds.

Governments are not always right. Governments make mistakes. It is unfortunate that the current government refuses to admit that it does not have all the answers.

With tax season well under way, my constituents of Random—Burin—St. George's, like Canadians everywhere, are duly reporting their hard-earned income to the Conservative government and paying their taxes. They rightfully expect the federal government in turn to tell them how their money is being spent.

As the government that created the largest deficit in Canadian history, the Conservatives have proven that they are not capable of spending taxpayer money prudently. With a government like this, my constituents rely upon the Parliamentary Budget Office for the truth, just as parliamentarians do. For example, while the Conservatives were trying to pull the wool over the eyes of Canadians with respect to the costs of the F-35 fighter jets, the Parliamentary Budget Officer was busy reporting the true costs of the purchase. Thanks, in part, to Mr. Page's timeless efforts on the file, Canadians knew all along that the government was not coming clean with the facts.

• (1135)

By revealing the true cost of the Conservative government's initiatives, such as the F-35 procurement process, as well as the Conservative crime agenda, it is the PBO, not the Conservative government, who has shown Canadians the real fiscal transparency and accountability.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to see that my Liberal colleagues support this motion. It seems they are starting to recognize that they made mistakes in the past. But it will take concrete action to prove that they have truly changed their ways.

Could the member tell me why it is that the Liberals did not attempt to create a similar position during their 13 years in power? I am certain that the government knew that this type of position existed.

The Congressional Budget Office in the United States has a similar role. They could have tried something like that in Canada.

[*English*]

Ms. Judy Foote: Mr. Speaker, I applaud the motion from the NDP. However, I find it ironic when questions come up about why we did not introduce a similar position. The fact is that there were other ways and other motions put forward that dealt with accountability in the House of Commons, in the Parliament of Canada. Under the Martin government, as my colleague mentioned, we put in place the Gomery inquiry. Just because we did not put in place a parliamentary budget officer does not mean we think any less of it. In fact, we are supportive of the position, as we have said time and time again.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to correct the record, the Liberals did not support the Federal Accountability Act and so I do not know where this new-found support comes from for the office. However, I have not heard yet today from either opposition party a cogent reason as to how the system is somehow broken currently and how the Parliamentary Budget Officer is not independent.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer is with the Library of Parliament, which everybody knows is non-partisan and is under the Speaker, who everybody knows plays a neutral role in the House. On the fact that the Parliamentary Budget Officer could be dismissed at any point by the Prime Minister, as opposition members keep alleging, he has not been, despite at times unfavourable criticism. The system is not broken, which is the actual truth.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer is independent. He has been critical of the government. Nobody can argue that he is a lapdog of the government in any sense. We may disagree, and I have heard arguments of style and how we may not agree with his opinions. However, the opposition members have not put forward a cogent argument as to how the system is broken and therefore needs to be fixed.

Ms. Judy Foote: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that we always support accountability and we supported accountability in the aspect of the financial act.

When we have a parliamentary budget officer who is being denigrated and publicly abused, who has been said to be doing things other than which his mandate includes, then how can one possibly say that the office is working as it is meant to work?

Clearly, we have an individual now who has done his job. However, to look at how he has been treated by the Conservative government, people will wonder why anyone would apply to be put in the same situation and be treated in that manner.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, could my colleague emphasize why we believe it is important that the term of the current Parliamentary Budget Officer, Kevin Page, be extended? When the government presents its budget, we might be in a better position if the present Parliamentary Budget Officer is given the opportunity to provide some feedback on that specific budget.

• (1140)

Ms. Judy Foote: Mr. Speaker, when a government brings down a budget, we know that it involves a great deal of expenditures on behalf of the Canadian taxpayer. If we do not have the Parliamentary Budget Officer in place, who is going to provide the oversight? Who is going to be there to answer the questions that parliamentarians and Canadians may have about the budget?

Right now the process has been so delayed in replacing Mr. Page that there is a very real possibility he may not be replaced before the budget is brought down. Therefore, it is absolutely imperative that Mr. Page's term be extended until after the budget if the Conservative government is not intent on filling his position prior to that.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Beauport—Limoilou.

Business of Supply

I am honoured to speak today on this important motion by my colleague, the member for Parkdale—High Park, our opposition finance critic.

This motion calls on the government to do two distinct things: first, to extend the mandate of the current Parliamentary Budget Officer, Mr. Page, until his replacement is named; and second, to make the PBO a full, independent officer of Parliament. I am going to speak to both of those issues.

I think we would all acknowledge that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has played, and continues to play, a critical role, one that is necessary for this Parliament to do its work and is ultimately making it easier for us to fulfill our responsibilities as parliamentarians in a functioning democracy.

However, if a replacement for the current Parliamentary Budget Officer is not named prior to the completion of Mr. Page's term on March 25, it is possible that the PBO may cease to function, with the staff effectively being returned to the Library of Parliament, we understand. That would be absolutely unacceptable.

The PBO has produced an outstanding body of top-quality work with very limited resources. We understand there is a skeleton staff of some 14 people. They have already exposed gross mismanagement of our economy to parliamentarians such as the true cost of the F-35s, the sustainability of the old age security and guaranteed income supplement program, and more.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer was a position created by the Conservatives and received, in principle, support across party lines. It is an independent officer, as I said, but as I will describe later, it is a very different kind of officer than the classic independent officers, such as the Auditor General, the Information Commissioner and the Privacy Commissioner. I will try to delineate those distinctions in a moment.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer's responsibilities include providing an independent analysis of the state of our economy, the nation's finances and the government's expenditure plan, and an analysis of the estimates of expenditures of any government department or agency when requested to do so by a parliamentary committee that is reviewing the estimates.

The officer is also mandated to provide an estimate of costs for any proposal that falls within the jurisdiction of the Parliament of Canada.

Now, I am urging members across the floor to support this motion. Many of them, if not all of them, supported the creation of the office in the first place. Therefore, surely they would share the same concern and understand why it is so vitally important to make sure there is no vacancy in that office.

The New Democratic Party is committed to sound public administration and as such believes that Canada requires a strong and independent Parliamentary Budget Officer. That is why my colleague from Parkdale—High Park moved this important motion, and that is why I felt so strongly that I would speak to this matter today.

On March 14, 2008, the government House leader first announced the appointment of Kevin Page as Canada's first Parliamentary Budget Officer. The government announced:

The appointment fulfills another commitment made to Canadians during the last election. "As promised in the federal Accountability Act, the Parliamentary Budget Officer will provide independent analysis to Canadians on the state of Canada's finances,"

said the hon. House leader:

"With his expertise in economics, Mr. Page is a fine choice to fill that position."

We agree. We therefore say that he should remain until his successor is named. He has proven over time that he has the confidence of Canadians in exercising his duties and informing the public on the state of the economy and how our tax dollars are spent.

For the sake of accountability, it is our position that it is crucial that parliamentarians, who are ultimately responsible in the coming months for providing input and oversight on the government's budget, continue to benefit from his invaluable advice.

Conservatives have attacked Mr. Page because he has continuously highlighted financial and fiscal mismanagement on many files.

● (1145)

These constant political attacks only serve to underscore the need for a strong and independent Parliamentary Budget Officer.

On November 21 of last year, the Parliamentary Budget Officer felt compelled to refer questions to the Federal Court to seek the court's guidance as to whether work requested by the leader of the official opposition was within his jurisdiction. The work requested that the PBO analyze the government's estimates to determine if the savings contemplated were achievable and/or had long-term fiscal implications, critical for him to do his very vital work.

The creation of the PBO was supported, I reiterate, by all parties in Parliament. However, it appears the current government has decided that it no longer considers fiscal accountability as a priority.

At the finance committee on February 5 this year, a committee of which I am a member, the Conservatives used procedural tactics to block the extension of the Parliamentary Budget Officer's current term. This action was disappointing, to say the least, particularly when they know as well as we do how important and cost effective this officer has been.

Let me give examples. The PBO has a grand total of 12 full-time staff, I am advised, with two interns. Contrast that with the Congressional Budget Office, which has 200-plus staff. The budget of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is \$2.8 million. The budget of the Congressional Budget Office: \$46.8 million. Yet, in its very short existence, the PBO has published over 150 analytical reports. That's not bad for such a small operation.

Business of Supply

The Parliamentary Budget Officer, in our view, provides tremendous value to all Canadians, by ensuring the government meets the basic tenets of financial and fiscal accountability. He has played an essential role in protecting our seniors, for example, who are critical in my riding of Victoria, by reporting that the OAS and GIS programs were sustainable prior to the Prime Minister's cuts to the program.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer regularly updates Parliament on the long-run fiscal sustainability of our country, an important type of study to ensure that young Canadians will not inherit a fiscal economic mess. In fact, the PBO has also pointed to Finance Canada's failure to provide intergenerational impacts on budget cuts.

Yet, the Conservatives have attacked anyone who has dared to disagree with them: Statistics Canada, our scientists, labour organizations, charities, and now, sadly, the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

In conclusion, New Democrats want to strengthen the already outstanding work of the PBO. We want to ensure there is no disruption to the continuous operation of this officer. To this end, we want his term to be extended until a replacement is made.

I want to now turn to the second of the issues I want to address, which is the need for the independent officer of Parliament status for this important office. We want this process to be open and transparent. There are widespread fears among Canadians that the government will either fail to fill the position or appoint someone unable or unwilling to act as effectively as Mr. Page has done. We want to further expand the outstanding work of this office in order for him to do his work without political attack.

This office is not the Auditor General; it is not like the Information Commissioner or the Privacy Commissioner. Each of them are officers of Parliament. What is the difference? They have a seven-year term. They are appointed upon joint address: a resolution of both Houses of Parliament. Canadians have seen the value of an independent Privacy Commissioner working on behalf of all of us to look after that important issue.

There is a precedent. Like this, the office was initially situated in a government agency. Canada's first Privacy Commissioner, Inger Hansen, was within the Canadian Human Rights Commission at first, and then, under the Privacy Act, became an independent officer of Parliament.

Legally, Canadians need exactly that level of independence and integrity, and that is where putting it in a separate officer of Parliament statute would provide that guarantee. If we have an effective Information Commissioner, Auditor General, Privacy Commissioner, we say the Parliamentary Budget Officer should have no less of a degree of independence to serve all Canadians.

• (1150)

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I found it quite amazing to listen to the speech.

If I have this right, the motion is that the NDP members want to take the position of the budget office, move it away from the independence of Parliament and give it to the government, which I suspect would lead them to say that if in 50 years they were maybe

to form the government they would have the opportunity to influence the office.

NDP members always talk about accountability and transparency. What I find amazes me daily is that when it comes to standing up for accountability, whether it is for first nations or unions, they actually stand up to oppose it, not once, but every time anything about accountability comes up.

Could the hon. member comment on that?

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, I think there were two points that were made. If I understood the question, the first was about moving away from the independence of Parliament and somehow giving the opposition the opportunity to influence that officer.

With respect, that betrays a misunderstanding of the role of officers of Parliament in our system. If I may repeat, the Auditor General, Information Commissioner and Privacy Commissioner are all examples of officers created by statute precisely so the government of the day cannot influence them. They have a seven-year term and an appointment by the Governor in Council, only after a joint resolution of both Houses of Parliament. That is the way in which Parliament guarantees independence. The NDP is asking for the same level of independence for the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

I appreciate—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order. We will carry on with questions and comments. The hon. member for Winnipeg North.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, across Canada, auditors general are the norm. Every province has an auditor general. Canada has the national Auditor General.

Over the last number of years, through the creation of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, there has been a need to have that additional set of eyes looking at government books, to bring more credibility to what the government is doing in terms of budgets.

Would the hon. member concede that this is a natural progression in terms of trying to have more accountability and transparency, and it is one reason members need to look at how to make this office even more independent going forward?

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, I accept in principle that there is a progression exactly as has occurred, as I pointed out, with the Privacy Commissioner of Canada. She was initially housed within an agency of the government. This is a similar situation vis-à-vis the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Eventually a statute was passed, called the Privacy Act, requiring her to have the independence of which I spoke, which is a seven-year term by joint address of both Houses.

Business of Supply

Why should members deprive ourselves of that with respect to this Parliamentary Budget Officer? I accept entirely that this would be a natural progression, as we have had in the past.

• (1155)

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member has pointed out the importance of the Parliamentary Budget Office.

In 46 days, the Conservatives will be moving to turn out the lights on the Parliamentary Budget Officer, leaving Canada as one of the only few large western democracies without an independent budget office. I think most Canadians would profoundly disagree with that. The hon. member for Victoria has very eloquently said why it is so important for the Canadian public to have this information.

I would like to ask the hon. member for Victoria what Canadians could do. Should they be phoning their Conservative MPs? Should they be writing to NDP members? Should they be raising a ruckus about the government turning out the lights on independent and impartial budget information?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The member for Victoria, a short response, please.

Mr. Murray Rankin: Mr. Speaker, Canadians must stand up and be counted on this. Canadians stood up when there was a desire for an Access to Information Act. A Conservative member, Mr. Ged Baldwin, devoted his career to achieving that goal. An Information Commissioner was appointed and Canadians have benefited by that statute.

They should stand up and demand no less in respect of accountability for our money. That is what is at issue and that is exactly what needs to occur. Look at value for money. The congressional budget—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Resuming debate, the hon. member for Beauport—Limoilou.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to take the floor in support of the motion introduced by my colleague from Parkdale—High Park. I am also happy to follow my colleague from Victoria, with whom I have the pleasure of working on the Standing Committee on Finance.

We had a very productive session this morning, and I must thank all my colleagues on the committee for examining the issues concerning tax havens in such a serious-minded manner.

Now, however, we are focusing on the fate of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, Kevin Page. I will now summarize the essential demands set out in our motion.

First, we ask that the mandate of the present Parliamentary Budget Officer be extended until his replacement is named. If we want to be serious and transparent, we cannot tolerate any interruption in the work of the office that Mr. Page has so brilliantly managed. Second, we are seeking legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament. We believe that aspect is essential, as my colleague from Victoria clearly indicated.

I would like to speak to the House about the role the Parliamentary Budget Officer plays despite the limits placed on him, particularly with regard to his staff and budget.

Under the Federal Accountability Act, the Parliamentary Budget Officer provides independent analysis to the Senate and House of Commons on the state of the nation's finances, the government's estimates and trends in the global economy. The act further provides that the Parliamentary Budget Officer undertake research into the nation's finances and economy and into the estimates of the government and that he estimates the financial cost of any proposal that relates to a matter over which Parliament has jurisdiction.

As some of my colleagues have previously noted, the Parliamentary Budget Officer manages this feat with limited resources, barely 12 full-time employees and two interns, as well as a budget of less than \$3 million. Mr. Page and his team have produced more than 150 analytical reports, an extraordinary effort, in the office's brief existence since 2008.

We are making significant demands on Parliament and on our work as representatives of our constituents because, if we do not have independent and appropriate means to acquire sound analyses on which to base our decisions, there will be major interference in our role and that will definitely undermine the serious task we have to perform.

There is another extremely important aspect. In addition to this direct role that the Parliamentary Budget Officer plays with regard to us, his work has indirect consequences for all Canadians. As is said in matters of justice, when a court sits to render justice, there must be the appearance of justice. Regardless of the decision reached, all observers must be satisfied that justice has been rendered.

In a similar way, we must be able to trust in the accountability and transparency of the government's operations. The government must be accountable to the public's legitimate representatives in the House and to the population as a whole. However, that trust can very easily be undermined, as it currently is, and as I have seen over my three election campaigns, from 2006, when I was elected, to 2011. I obviously listen to all the citizens in my riding of Beauport—Limoilou because I want to know what the situation is and what they are thinking.

• (1200)

The appointment of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is a very important issue because becoming an officer of Parliament would afford him much greater leeway and independence than he currently enjoys.

I will simply draw a very brief comparison between an officer of Parliament and a staff member of the Library of Parliament, which is the Parliamentary Budget Officer's current status.

The members of the library's staff report to the speakers of both Houses. However, it is a well-established fact, which no one can dispute, that they do not enjoy the same independence as officers of Parliament. The Parliamentary Budget Officer is appointed by cabinet from a list of three names submitted by the Library of Parliament. That process has a certain value, but not the much greater, much more comprehensive and reassuring value of the process that leads to the appointment of officers of Parliament.

Business of Supply

This is really very important. My colleague from Victoria and many of my other colleagues have clearly emphasized the disproportion between the resources available to the Parliamentary Budget Officer and those of the U.S. Congressional Budget Office, which has some 235 professional employees and a budget of more than \$45 million. That was for the 2011 fiscal year.

Proportionally, based on Canada's population and economy relative to those of the United States, the Parliamentary Budget Officer and his team have approximately half the resources of their American counterparts. There is no need for complicated calculations to understand that; a simple rule of three is enough.

We could potentially even debate the percentage increase in the budget that would be necessary just to meet the challenges. I do not necessarily think that doubling those resources would be enough. First we would need to do a more detailed study in this House of what is needed. Perhaps we might conclude that additional resources are needed, but I will not be answering that question in my speech.

What is very important, based on these comparisons, on the established facts, is to understand what Mr. Page's sad fate has been during his mandate since 2008.

I cannot help but cite an excerpt from the *Rick Mercer Report*. He essentially said that Kevin Page did his job on old age security, deficit projections and budget cuts. He always did his job, and he was called every name in the book, often by people who had never even read one. Nobody wants the job. Why? Read the job description: serve your country, tell the truth and get attacked by the government for doing so. That is what was said on the program.

I enjoy comedy programs, and I am a big fan of cartoons. What always surprises me, what amazes me, is the turn of phrase, the way these talented people come up with just the right way to describe political life and the issues that affect our society. I thank Mr. Mercer. I think he really put his finger on something very important. He paid tribute to Mr. Page's tenacity throughout his mandate. Objectively speaking, this is ultimately a difficult and demanding job. I mentioned the lack of resources available to him, but, apart from that, his task was made even more difficult by constant government attacks.

Fortunately, when it comes to objectively assessing the value of his work, Mr. Page has some rather important non-partisan allies.

• (1205)

Take, for example, the debate over the sustainability of old age security. On February 8, 2012, the Minister of Finance called the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report unbelievable, unreliable and incredible, when it concluded that old age security was sustainable in its existing form.

But Mr. Page's report echoed reports produced by the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions.

In light of all of this evidence showing the value of Mr. Page and the work he accomplished in this position, I think that our motion at least goes far enough to secure the usefulness of this position, to both Parliament and to all Canadians.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we need to evaluate just how much work the Parliamentary Budget Officer does for Canadians and the amount of money that is actually allocated to his budget. The member made reference to \$3 million. That is the budget provided to this particular officer and as a result we get a great deal of value. The member also made mention of the number of reports.

Just last year the Conservatives, with the support of the NDP I must say, proposed to increase the size of the House of Commons by 30 new members of Parliament. Canadians do not believe there is a need to have more politicians. That cost is estimated at somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$30 million a year. Therefore, at 10% of that budget, we could have a well-financed parliamentary budget office. Many would argue that the amount of money that is given to the Parliamentary Budget Officer should be increased.

Does the member agree that the government has bad priorities in terms of the financing of the Parliamentary Budget Officer role and is not assigning it the true value of its actual worth?

[Translation]

Mr. Raymond Côté: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Winnipeg North for his question.

It is surprising to hear him bring up rearguard fights about a debate that is over and done with. What I am about to say may be mean, but this reminded me of my late father. He was a long-time card-carrying member of the Liberal Party of Canada, and during the sponsorship scandal he tore up his card in anger saying, "they stole my Liberal Party."

I never forgot that. I make no bones about it. This makes me emotional, because we did not share the same political convictions, but we really had some meaningful debates. I respected my father a great deal for that. So I urge my colleague to continue working on rebuilding his party.

• (1210)

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would not want to over-simplify things, but I would like to know if my colleague agrees with me.

I get the sense that this is about respect for democracy and parliamentary institutions. Mr. Page's title includes the word "parliamentary". He serves all parliamentarians. The problem is that some members of the House think there are only 161 parliamentarians. But there are 308 of us. Nobody can say that we are not doing our work or that we slack off. We spend our evenings and weekends working. We all—Liberals, NDP and independent members alike—take this job very seriously. We all represent our ridings with as much dignity as possible.

Some of the members opposite think that because we are on the wrong side of the House, we are clowns or nonentities, that we do not count. Personally, I feel that I am paid well, so I work hard to earn my keep. I find it insulting to be considered a bit player in a comedy.

Business of Supply

Mr. Raymond Côté: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Laurentides—Labelle. We have been working together for nearly two years, and I must say that I would be the first to be surprised if he simplified any debate.

I derive deep satisfaction from the many debates and discussions that my colleague and I have about issues related to the health of our democracy and our shared future.

I think that he has put his finger on something important. Unfortunately, the governing party is oversimplifying, which could end up undermining the health of our democracy.

It is utterly fascinating to take part in everything that happens here in the House, to see how extraordinarily complex it is—much like a human body—and how fragile it can be. In general, however, it is a sturdy institution.

I will continue to discuss issues with my colleague so that we can find solutions for the future and for the common good.

[English]

Mr. Bryan Hayes (Sault Ste. Marie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member for Palliser.

I would like to take this opportunity to restate the government's view of the parliamentary budget office. As members know, it was the Conservative government that created the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to provide independent analysis to the House of Commons and Senate about the state of the nation's finances and the economy.

This office was a key element in the Federal Accountability Act that demonstrated our commitment to accountable government following 13 years of Liberal mismanagement. In fact, strengthening accountability and increasing the transparency of our public institutions has been one of the hallmarks of this government.

On coming into office, our first order of business was to introduce and implement the Federal Accountability Act. This act provided Canadians with the assurance that the powers entrusted in the government were being exercised in the public interest.

Some of those items from the Federal Accountability Act included reforming the financing of political parties, banning secret donations to political candidates, strengthening the role of the Ethics Commissioner, toughening the Lobbyists Registration Act, making qualified government appointments, cleaning up the procurement of government contracts, cleaning up government polling and advertising, providing real protection for whistleblowers, and strengthening access to information legislation.

The act was wholeheartedly embraced by Canadians. That was just under seven years ago. The Federal Accountability Act and its supporting action plan contain dozens of measures and hundreds of amendments to some 45 federal statutes, touching virtually every part of government and beyond.

We did not stop there. We recognized that parliamentarians and parliamentary committees needed access to independent, objective analysis and advice on economic and fiscal issues to better hold the government to account for its decisions.

That is why we established the Office of Parliamentary Budget Officer within the Library of Parliament. The mandate of that office is to provide independent analysis to the Senate and House of Commons about the state of the nation's finances, the estimates of the government and trends in the national economy. It is to undertake research on the nation's finances and economy and the estimates of the government when requested to do so by certain parliamentary committees. When requested to do so by a member or a committee, it is to estimate the financial cost of any proposal relating to a matter over which Parliament has jurisdiction.

Essentially, the job of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to give parliamentarians information and independent analysis they can use, along with information provided by the government, to hold the government to account with respect to the nation's finances and the economy.

This is exactly what has happened since the office was formed in March 2008. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has published many reports since his appointment. In his role within the Library of Parliament, the PBO has studied many things, including our government's economic action plan, which has created more than 900,000 net new jobs since July 2009.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer's position within the Library of Parliament provides an excellent platform for the officer to perform credible, non-partisan research and analysis on fiscal matters within his mandate.

Our Conservative government has continued to provide Canadians, parliamentarians and the Parliamentary Budget Officer with record amounts of information on government spending.

Another hallmark of this government has been the strong management of the nation's finances and the economy since 2006. In fact, I am happy to say that the main message of the Parliamentary Budget Officer's most recent report, the "Expenditure Monitor: 2012-13 Q2," is that the government is on track with its spending reductions. In other words, our reductions in direct program spending are in line with the restraint efforts we announced in budget 2012.

● (1215)

The "Expenditure Monitor" is a periodic report that examines recent changes in the government's expenditures and compares them to our stated expenditure plans. As the report makes clear, we are making good headway toward our goals of contributing to balanced budgets and reducing growth in government. I would add that the Parliamentary Budget Officer is not the only who thinks so. Our strong management of the national economy is recognized around the world.

Business of Supply

For a few years now, *Forbes* magazine has ranked Canada among the best countries in the world to operate, thanks to our sound banking system, declining tax rates and, yes, our relative lack of red tape. Also, in December, Canada cracked the global top 10 when it comes to corporate tax competitiveness, according to a report by PricewaterhouseCoopers. It looked at our tax rates, now the lowest among the G7, as well as the number of hours it takes a business to fill out all the forms and actually pay those taxes. Guess what? Under our Conservative government, Canada went from 28th in the world in 2010 to 8th place.

However, taxation is not the only area where Canada is outperforming. Canadian economic growth has also been more resilient than growth in other G7 economies, both during the recession as well as throughout the recovery. Most striking, Canada has outperformed all other G7 economies in job creation during the recovery. Our government remains on track to balance the budget in the medium term and to maintain its position of having the best fiscal record in the G7 with the lowest debt to GDP ratio.

Taken together, it is not surprising then that Canada is internationally recognized as one of the best places in the world to do business. Our fiscal situation is the envy of other nations. Our taxes are low. We continue to create jobs and we are cutting red tape. This is what we were mandated to do and it is exactly what we are doing.

I would add to that list our strong commitment to accountability and transparency, as demonstrated by our government's sweeping anti-corruption measures under the Federal Accountability Act. It was our government that created the parliamentary budget office. We believe it is capable, in its current form, of conducting credible, non-partisan support for parliamentarians.

• (1220)

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if there were ever an issue that we could agree on in the House, it would be the importance of having objective information that circulates freely.

Unfortunately, an increasing number of people in Quebec and Canada are feeling that this information is becoming more propaganda-like, and the uncertainty surrounding the appointment of Mr. Page's replacement is no exception.

My question for the member is simple. Does he not feel that making this position an officer of the House would help eliminate ambiguity?

[English]

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Speaker, I guess it really boils to what is need for making this position an officer of Parliament?

Under the position's current mandate, the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to provide independent analysis to Parliament on the state of the nation's finances, government estimates and trends in the Canadian economy. The role is not designed to be an independent watchdog. It is not designed to be an auditor general, chief electoral officer, privacy commissioner or access to information commissioner. All of those are independent officers, but that is not what this role was designed to be. The PBO is functioning perfectly well within the Library of Parliament, and that is where it belongs.

As for replacing the PBO, who has a five-year appointment, it is up to the Library of Parliament to go through the short list, which it is doing right now in looking for new candidates. The Library of Parliament will make the selection on behalf of the House of Commons, the Senate and the Government of Canada.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I require a simple yes or no for an answer. My question is surrounding the ongoing saga of the F-35s. As the situation unfolded we saw how several people had made guesstimates about how much this would cost at the end of the life cycle of the next generation jet fighter. The government departments, Public Works and National Defence, basically had a certain number in mind but the Parliamentary Budget Officer had a different number, a much higher number, in mind.

The hon. member says that the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to keep the government to account. Obviously the PBO has to challenge the government to be at its best. Is that an example of what the member is talking about? How the PBO was so right and Conservatives were so wrong? Yes or no.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Speaker, what we need to look at is what is factored into the costs of the F-35 and what we refer to as life cycle costing. As a government we have always used a 20-year life cycle costing. The Parliamentary Budget Officer chose to use a different methodology. Ultimately what has come out of this is that we will have some clear definition of life cycle costing. We have come to our seven-point plan with the secretariat for procurement. Ultimately all the costs will be clear. KPMG just did a study, which reaffirmed the acquisition costs as being \$9 billion. It reaffirmed the ongoing operating costs.

Quite frankly, the reports were very accurate and the government was very accurate.

• (1225)

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I recall being on the Library of Parliament committee as my first committee when I was elected in 2008. We studied the issue of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. All the witnesses who were part of that process said that the Parliamentary Budget Officer clearly overstepped the responsibility of the role in the way they had envisioned it.

I recall a point when the Parliamentary Budget Officer spoke out on a very specific issue during an election. I would like the member's impression of it and whether he thinks it was unprecedented and, for that matter, appropriate.

Mr. Bryan Hayes: Mr. Speaker, to speak to the Library of Parliament specifically, which is where the parliamentary budget office belongs, we all believe that the researchers within the Library of Parliament do excellent work on our behalf. In terms of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, maybe his mandate needs to be clarified. I suggest moving forward we might look at where he did overstep his mandate, if in fact he did, for the future Parliamentary Budget Officer who takes office.

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Mr. Ray Boughen (Palliser, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today, I will be speaking on the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer and the estimates process.

I am pleased to add to the debate on the current role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to provide independent analysis to parliamentarians in the context of the estimates process. This government understands that parliamentarians must have the information they need to consider estimates and public supply bills. We understand, as well, that the Parliamentary Budget Officer must have the information he needs to provide parliamentarians with independent analysis of government spending.

This is a fundamental part of Canada's system of government and it is one of the keys to assuring Parliament and Canadians that public resources are being used efficiently and effectively. In our system of government, it is the responsibility of the government to prepare its budgets and policy agenda and the responsibility of Parliament to hold government to account for its actions and resulting outcomes.

That is why, upon coming to power in 2006, our Conservative government passed the Federal Accountability Act, the most sweeping anti-corruption legislation, after 13 years of Liberal mismanagement. The act continues to ensure that Parliament has the information it needs to hold the government to account.

The estimates process is a good example. Each year the government prepares main estimates and supplementary estimates, as required, in support of its request to Parliament for authority to spend public funds. This request is formalized through the tabling of appropriate bills in Parliament.

Supplementary estimates seek the funding required by departments and agencies to implement government-approved programs throughout the year. They are also required to transfer funds approved in the main estimates from one organization to another or within organizations, and from one appropriation to another. In addition, the supplementary estimates are used to inform Parliament of changes in the estimated costs of programs that are authorized by legislation other than the appropriation acts. Tabling the main estimates and supplementary estimates to seek Parliament's authority for spending is indeed a critical part of Parliament's oversight of the government's spending plans.

However, we are not only providing information to parliamentarians. We are providing information to Canadians. By making information accessible, we are also empowering Canadians to hold government to account. In fact, Canada is a leader in providing accessible information to citizens. Among other things, our progressive government's Federal Accountability Act signified the expansion of the scope of the Access to Information Act, created the whistleblower protection act and enforced the Conflict of Interest Act.

The Federal Accountability Act provides Canadians with the assurance that the power entrusted to the government is being well used and exercised in the public interest. The act, and its supplementary action plan, contains dozens of other measures and hundreds of amendments of some 45 federal statutes that touch virtually every part of government and beyond. My colleague made mention about that in his speech earlier this afternoon.

We also recognized that parliamentarians and parliamentary committees need to access independent objective analysis and advice on economic and fiscal issues to better hold the government to account for its decisions. That is why we established the position of the Parliamentary Budget Officer within the Library of Parliament.

The mandate of this officer is, first, to provide independent analysis to the Senate and House of Commons about the state of the nation's finances, the estimates of the government and trends in the national economy. Second, it is to undertake research into the nation's finances and economy and the estimates of the government, where requested to do so by certain parliamentary committees. Third, when requested to do so by a member or a committee, it is the office's mandate to estimate the financial cost of any proposal that relates to a matter over which Parliament has jurisdiction. The job of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, then, is to give parliamentarians non-partisan information and independent analysis surrounding the nation's finances and the economy.

• (1230)

Our government's commitment to make our public institutions more accountable and more transparent is clear. We have taken strong action to provide the Parliamentary Budget Officer with significant amounts of public and non-publicly available information to conduct analysis and render decisions. For our part, we support a non-partisan Parliamentary Budget Officer's interest in providing parliamentarians and the public with more timely and easy to use data on departmental spending. For example, we regularly share publicly available information with that office, such as the supplementary estimates, and we respond to requests for information from the PBO with the appropriate publicly available information.

Specifically, departments assess the nature of the information that the Parliamentary Budget Officer requests and what documents can or cannot be shared. That does not include information that falls within the scope of cabinet confidences. This information is protected in accordance with section 79.3 of the Parliament of Canada Act. Nevertheless, we are committed to continue to ensure transparency and diligence in providing an unprecedented amount of information.

Without a doubt, this government is committed to improving accountability and increasing transparency. We have proven that, not only with words but with actions: first, through the estimates process; second, through the implementation of the Federal Accountability Act; and third, by establishing and supporting the work of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

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The measures I have talked about today help provide Canadians with the honest and open government that they deserve, one that acts transparently, ensures value for money and demonstrates accountability for the people of this country. Unlike the members of the NDP, we believe that the current structure of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer can provide insightful, non-partisan analysis of fiscal matters within its current mandate.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened very closely to my distinguished colleague. He spoke of an independent, non-partisan Parliamentary Budget Officer with a decent budget and so on.

I listened closely, but the big issue I have is that he did not say if he agrees that the PBO should become an officer of Parliament and should no longer be an employee of the Library of Parliament. I would like some clarification on that point.

Does he agree that the office should be completely independent and totally free of all political interference? Does he agree that the PBO should become an officer of Parliament instead of remaining part of the Library of Parliament's staff?

• (1235)

[English]

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, we are all responsible to someone for something. None of us live in a vacuum where we do not have a degree of accountability for our actions and what we propose to do. The PBO has to be accountable. He or she has to maintain an arm's-length distance from the government and from the opposition. It is a fairly tricky move. The PBO is and he is not, and it takes a special person to be able to handle that. That is why the library is currently looking at bringing in someone who can fill the role of the leaving PBO.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is one thing I would like the member to comment on while we are talking about accountability. During the 2006 election the Conservative Party under the leadership of the current Prime Minister committed to bringing in an accountability act, to bringing in the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Why is it important that a party, which says it will do something during an election, actually puts that in place after it gets elected?

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, in answer to the hon. member's question, let me just say that the Conservative Party is one that states what it is it is about to do and why it is going in that direction, and then it does it. The reference the hon. member made earlier about the election process of 2006 is a fine example of that.

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if the member for Palliser and the Conservative Party are so concerned about increasing accountability, they would provide the PBO with all the information he needs, instead of forcing the PBO to go to court to get what he needs.

In terms of the F-35, the PBO and the Auditor General spent \$1.8 million doing reports and audits on the F-35 file. What was the government's response to these transparent reports? It spent \$800,000 more of taxpayers' money to get a private firm to do a report that would give it an answer it wanted.

Canadians expect more of their government. They expect increased accountability. It is hard to swallow the member talking about accountability when the government is wasting taxpayers' money on private reports and court challenges to a position that is supposed to increase accountability.

Mr. Ray Boughen: Mr. Speaker, I think it goes without saying that if we have an expenditure of billions of dollars, it makes pretty good sense, to my way of thinking, if it costs \$800,000 to determine if we are spending the money in the right direction for the right product. We should be able to figure that out through consultation with people whose business it is to deal with those kinds of questions.

We as parliamentarians do not make decisions that drive the world. Sometimes we think we do, but we really do not. If we need good knowledge, we need to go to those who have the knowledge. I would respectfully suggest that people in the air industry find out whether we are going to be spending the right amount of money in the right direction.

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with my colleague from Marc-Aurèle-Fortin.

As this is the first time in 2013 that I have risen to speak in this House, I would like to take the opportunity to wish all Canadians, and especially the residents of Pierrefonds—Dollard, of course, a very happy new year.

I would also like to express the hope that my Conservative colleagues have made very good and wise resolutions and that they will be keeping them. If they need any inspiration, I would encourage them to come and see me. I would be very pleased to help, because I have many suggestions that I could make to them.

That being said, let us come back to the main issue, today's NDP motion. I am grateful that I have been allowed to express my views on this matter. I have been a member of Parliament on Parliament Hill for a little more than a year and a half now, and my responsibilities as an MP have sometimes led me to depend on reports by the Parliamentary Budget Officer. I will explain on which occasions later. This issue is therefore very relevant to my day-to-day reality as a member of Parliament.

Before informing the House of all these very interesting arguments, I would first like to put all this into context. Barely two years ago, I was not very familiar with the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. It is likely that the same could be said of many other MPs as well.

In 2006, following the sponsorship scandal, the government introduced the Federal Accountability Act. All parties worked on the bill, which received support from all the parties in the House of Commons. This is actually quite remarkable. On March 14, 2008, the current government House leader announced the appointment of Kevin Page as the very first Parliamentary Budget Officer in Canada, for a five-year period.

What was his mandate exactly? The Federal Accountability Act states explicitly that the Parliamentary Budget Officer is responsible for providing independent analysis to the Senate and the House of Commons. The act states that the Parliamentary Budget Officer conducts research into the state of the nation's finances, the economy and the government's estimates—including planned spending—and that he estimates the financial cost of any proposal for matters over which Parliament has jurisdiction.

To give more tangible examples, a review of the federal budget is prepared every year, and a report on the economic and fiscal outlook is produced a few times a year. Other reports are prepared at the request of parliamentarians. I am thinking in particular of the report on the financial impact of the Safe Streets and Communities Act, a subject that we discussed here and that gave rise to a great deal of interest, and the report entitled "The Funding Requirement for First Nations Schools in Canada".

I have just given two examples of matters that gave rise to a great deal of controversy and interest among Canadians. Reports from an independent expert on these issues furthered discussion and provided parliamentarians and Canadians with tools so that they could understand the issues better and be more critical of the measures taken by the government, which is very worthwhile and extremely important.

However, even though I have just spoken about the context and the importance of the work of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, the opposition is now concerned about the future of the role and the mandate of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. This is why the NDP has moved this motion, which calls on the government to extend the mandate of current Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page until his replacement is named.

His mandate expires on March 25, not in 2015, but this year. In a little over a month, the Parliamentary Budget Officer's mandate will expire. Up to this point, we have absolutely no reason to believe that any effort has been made to find Kevin Page's successor. All we are asking for in that part of the motion is that his mandate be extended, if necessary, until his replacement is named and is ready to take his place. Everyone agrees that there is nothing unreasonable about that.

Furthermore, today's NDP motion calls on the government to support legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament.

● (1240)

Now, I would like to elaborate on this a little. Why would we want the Parliamentary Budget Officer to be an independent officer of Parliament? It is really self-explanatory: to give that individual greater independence. I will explain why we are asking for this.

As my colleague said earlier, it is true that the Conservatives were elected on a promise to clean up Parliament and introduce sound management and transparency. That is easy to say in an election campaign, and it appealed to Canadians.

Over the past few years, however, the Conservatives have not kept their promises. Instead we have been treated to scandals, over-spending, fraud, misleading phone calls from Pierre Poutine, and so on. Canadians know what I am talking about. Meanwhile, the

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Parliamentary Budget Officer has been under pressure, not from the opposition, but from the government.

For instance, I could quote the current President of the Treasury Board, who said:

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

An independent officer of Parliament is not told what he should or should not study. The officer is given a mandate, which he carries out independently. Pressure from the government validates the NDP's concerns and its interest in making this important parliamentary officer more independent.

Some hon. members: Bravo.

Mme Lyane Blanchette-Lamothe: I see that I have some support, so I must not be completely out in left field.

I will also talk briefly about partisan appointments. That is another reason why we need someone who is independent. The Conservatives are past masters of partisan appointments. We want to ensure that this does not happen.

I do not want to be taken the wrong way. I am not saying that Mr. Page, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, is partisan. On the contrary, he has done an excellent job to date. We want to ensure that he has all the tools he needs to continue doing a good job and that he is given some more latitude in order to do an even better job.

So far, we have heard a number of Conservatives say that they do not agree with this proposal. However, it seems to me that it should not be up to the government to say yes or no to more independence for the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Please excuse me for talking about this subject in such simple terms. I was an elementary school teacher and I am going to indulge myself. I would like everyone to imagine for a moment that a tiger has escaped from the zoo. No one knows where it has gone and the zoo's director is wondering whether to perhaps increase security measures around the tiger cage. If the tigers tell the director that such action is not necessary, that the enclosures should be left as they are, that they will not try to escape, that they will not make a mess and that there is no need to worry, will that reassure the tourists and visitors? I am not sure that it is up to the tigers to decide whether or not security measures should be enhanced. They are not in the best position to make that decision.

This is perhaps a somewhat simplistic example, but it is just to show that the Conservatives may not be in the best position to decide not to grant officers more power and independence.

I would like to quote a few experts. A professor from the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria said:

...I would make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full agent of Parliament to assist parliamentarians and committees.

Another expert had this to say:

I think the PBO, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, can assist committees... immensely. I agree...that he should be an officer of Parliament. I also think that making him an officer of Parliament means that he does not get stuck in limbo, wondering what he can or cannot do...

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The NDP is not the only one who believes that everyone will benefit if the Parliamentary Budget Officer is given more authority and independence. I do not understand why the government is opposed to this suggestion. I hope that all parliamentarians will support this motion since it is an opportunity to work together on being more transparent and accountable.

• (1245)

[English]

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have had the chance to listen to a number of speeches today. What I am struggling with is the idea of greater independence. How does one measure independence? For example, we measure the freedom and independence of a free press by its ability to criticize a government and not be closed down. That is freedom and independence.

I am not sure how we would provide greater independence for the Parliamentary Budget Officer. At times, he has not only been very critical of the government, its initiatives, numbers and things like that, but his appointment is non-partisan. The list of candidates is not chosen by the government in council. The appointment is made by government in council but is chosen from a list of the Library of Parliament, which is non-partisan and unbiased.

Could the member explain how we would measure greater independence other than by the silence of the government? I think that is what her party really wants, that the government should have no opinion on the quality of the report, the information or the data. However, that does not mean greater independence for the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Could she explain how we would get greater independence than a non-partisan appointment and the ability to criticize the government at will?

• (1250)

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

The NDP is not making this stuff up. There are differences between officers of Parliament and Library of Parliament staff members. Officers of Parliament have more independence than people who work for the Library of Parliament.

I would like to add that the Conservatives attacked Mr. Page because he repeatedly pointed out their poor financial management. These constant political attacks revealed the need for a strong and independent Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Could my colleague tell me what the government would lose if the Parliamentary Budget Officer had more independence? Why not give it a try? What is there to lose? Nothing, except the fear of having a bit more transparency.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if all political parties support the need for a parliamentary budget officer and recognize the valuable work that Mr. Kevin Page does, then we should draw the conclusion that in the interim, between now and the next number of months, it would be appropriate to extend the contract of Mr. Page in the capacity of Parliamentary Budget Officer

for the House and all Canadians, given the fact that we have an upcoming budget. He is in a much better position to provide an assessment of the billions of dollars proposed to be spent in the upcoming budget.

Does the member not agree how important it is that we give him that extension?

[Translation]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for his question.

The NDP certainly agrees with extending the Parliamentary Budget Officer's mandate if necessary. If we have not found a successor or if the successor is not appointed and ready to take over, it is important for the office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to continue operating.

This office has produced about 150 reports in five years. As a member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, I can say that these reports help us get to the truth and have a critical eye when examining the figures presented by the government.

The office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer must absolutely continue its important work.

Mr. Alain Giguère (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am going to try to present an approach that is different from the one taken by my colleagues: an overall vision of a government that must act and must have a watchdog. In this case, the watchdogs are the officers of Parliament.

Need we recall the circumstances in which the position held by Mr. Page, the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer, was created?

At the time, following a series of financial scandals, all political parties agreed to seven recommendations made by Mr. Broadbent, the former leader of the New Democratic Party. One of them was that there be someone who could provide information to parliamentarians faster and more easily.

It is essential that parliamentarians be well informed so they have a more accurate idea of what they need to investigate and so they can be sure they clearly understand the consequences of their votes on financial legislation. To a large extent, that is what it was.

Mismanagement by the government may be an isolated incident, but it can also be a pattern. No one is immune to mistakes. The only people who never make mistakes are people who do nothing. Since parliamentarians do a lot, it is entirely probable that they will make mistakes.

In the past, a Parliamentary Budget Officer was quite useful on the question of the firearms registry. That registry was supposed to cost \$20 million, but it cost \$2 billion. That is a little discrepancy that it would have been nice to have brought to our attention faster. As well, sponsorships would have been cut much sooner.

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On the question of using \$58 billion from the employment insurance fund, if someone had said at the time that the money should not be taken or it would cause major problems for unemployed people, we would not be where we are right now. The unemployed are in trouble now. If the \$58 billion had stayed in the employment insurance fund, we would not be having to make reforms now to save a few crusts. People who are starving find crusts very useful.

The NDP hopes to form the government in 2015. If that happens, it will not be immune to mistakes. It may be that an environment bill introduced by the NDP someday will cost too much. It would be practical for someone to tell us we are making a mistake and we have to make adjustments. Since we are responsible, we would make those adjustments. There is no shame in making a mistake. What is idiotic, however, is to keep repeating the same mistake and hoping to get a different result. That is the height of idiocy. Unfortunately, the same mistake keeps getting made at present.

With respect to the F-35s, the Conservatives should be thanking the officers of Parliament and the Parliamentary Budget Officer for saving them and the taxpayers money, a bill of \$30 billion in additional costs. That is no small thing. It is a major mistake, but they persisted. That problem should have been solved when the report was first submitted. Instead, they persisted in repeating the same lies, over and over, hoping that someday they would become the truth. Regarding the F-35s, they were told that the cost would be \$45 billion. Then the Auditor General told them that the cost would be \$45 billion. And finally National Defence admitted that it would cost \$45 billion. That is a long way from the \$15 billion initially predicted. And yet it took three answers before they saw sense. That is the problem. There are none so blind as those who will not see.

In this case, all of the parties who are here now created the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer. It is not just yours. It is also ours.

●(1255)

The position was established unanimously and it has proved its worth.

Governments around the world are grappling with the question of who supervises those in power. Here, we have the officers of Parliament. Mr. Page is not an officer of Parliament. He is an employee of the Library of Parliament—an employee. He does not possess the powers of an officer of Parliament. It is not part of his role to require a department to undergo an audit; he needs to ask permission. This is a major difference.

When it comes to establishing his budget, he has to discuss it with a hierarchy of bureaucrats that depend on political powers. An officer of Parliament discusses his budget before Parliament, in full view of the political class. There is a difference in terms of independence.

We would like the PBO to have greater independence. That is why we would like the Parliamentary Budget Officer, who is preparing to leave, to retain his authority and for Mr. Page to remain in the position until his replacement has been appointed. We would like to avoid having to do without a Parliamentary Budget Officer for any period of time. It is hard to believe that those who claim to have

created the position and want to keep it should so readily agree that the position should go unfilled for a while. There are times when criticism requires circumspection.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer's budget also contributes to his independence, which is what keeps him from getting bogged down in frivolous requests, and prevents him being overwhelmed by directives. This is extremely important. Within an officer of Parliament's general mandate he or she establishes his or her own objectives and immediate missions. The Parliamentary Budget Officer cannot because he is an employee of the Library of Parliament. If he is given an order to conduct an investigation, and even if the investigation will not amount to much, he is required to conduct it. When the Standing Committee on Finance ordered him henceforth to conduct audits on all written requests, he was obliged to comply. He is not an officer of Parliament, but rather a public servant, and that is a major difference.

If we compare this situation to what happens in the United States, Japan and other countries, we see that the people in these countries have genuine checks and balances, and the authority to inform parliamentarians about any excesses. Here, this power has been worn down, largely diminished and restricted.

We can say that the work has been done well. It is sometimes politically unpleasant, particularly when people insist on denying the truth. As soon as Mr. Page's report on the F-35s was presented, the government should have admitted that something was wrong, apologized, re-done its homework and done some checking. This did not happen.

Churchill used to say that the most important of all parliamentary committees is the public accounts committee. I am a member of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts, and I can attest to the critical importance of having a source of information other than the government, a source that can disagree and has greater freedom of action.

I would like to conclude with a wonderful quote from Galileo:

The authority of thousands of opinions is not worth as much as one tiny spark of reason in an individual man.

When I refer to thousands of opinions, I am talking about the entire government.

●(1300)

[English]

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it was an interesting speech but I am still trying to figure out how we would measure greater independence than having someone appointed from a list presented by a non-partisan organization like the Library of Parliament, someone with complete freedom to be publicly critical and not lose their position. I am trying to figure out what the NDP is actually asking for in calling for more independence. The Parliamentary Budget Officer determines his own priorities. Indeed, a request of mine in the past to examine something was turned down by him, even though the PBO serves members of Parliament.

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The role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is simple. It is to provide non-partisan information so that MPs can be watchdogs. It is not that the PBO is to be a watchdog of the government. That is what the opposition members want to transform the PBO into, and that is a dangerous road to go down because it could lead the PBO to being subject to legitimate criticisms of partisanship. It is to equip members of Parliament, unless the opposition members believe they are no longer effective watchdogs of the government. Maybe that is why they want to change this role.

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Giguère: Mr. Speaker, public servants are not officers of Parliament. Their career progression is tied to a bureaucratic hierarchy. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has no authority over other public servants and cannot obtain certain required documents. Currently, he must go to court to get the documents he needs.

That makes no sense. This is proof positive that we need an officer of Parliament to carry out this duty. The Parliamentary Budget Officer cannot set his own budget. He is not accountable to us. He is accountable to a hierarchy of public servants who are accountable to politicians.

Our answer to everything the member said is yes. Yes, we have to give this officer greater independence.

• (1305)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, just because the government says something does not necessarily mean it is true. The Parliamentary Budget Officer will reinforce that. I will give two or three very short examples.

One could talk about the firearms registry. The government said how much money it cost, but how much did the Parliamentary Budget Officer say it cost? We could talk about seniors' pension crisis. Government said how much it costs and the Parliamentary Budget Officer said something different. For the F-35s, the government said an amount and the Parliamentary Budget Officer said something entirely different.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer does profile important issues, not necessarily taking sides on a political issue but raising issues to the degree of making the discussion more credible, thus adding to the debate and the value for all Canadians.

Would the member agree that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has done fabulous work in raising the credibility of the numbers related to issues?

[Translation]

Mr. Alain Giguère: Mr. Speaker, he simply checked the numbers and provided us with a non-partisan answer. He was not the only one who gave us that answer. A lot of other information came from the same government source.

Problems arise when the government refuses to accept the truth. That is the problem. If the government agreed to rectify the situation every time it made a mistake, there would not be a problem. We would not be having this discussion now. The Parliamentary Budget Officer is not the problem. The problem is the government, which systematically ignores any information that is not in line with its

messages and its obsession with telling everyone that it is perfect just because it is doing something.

Perfection does not exist, and the Conservatives are far from perfect when they make mistakes on the order of 300%, as they did with respect to the F-35s.

[English]

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the hon. member for Winnipeg South Centre, who was member of our public accounts committee, where her skills as a former accountant and auditor certainly served the committee well.

I am pleased to take this opportunity to discuss the parliamentary budget office and our government's strong commitment to sound fiscal management and reporting.

Managing the nation's finances has become increasingly challenging in today's global economy, and we have proven that we are up to that challenge with each phase of our Conservative government's economic action plan. In particular, there have been a number of economic factors that required us to act. They include the global economic downturn and, more recently, the problems in the eurozone. At home, our economy faces demographic pressures, such as our aging population.

In this changing economy, the organizations that succeed are those that adapt and listen. The same is true in government. That is why members on this side of the House consult with Canadians each year and report to the Minister of Finance by helping him prepare the budget. In short, we are listening to Canadians.

I am pleased to say that our government has taken strong action to meet the evolving expectations of Canadians, whom we have consulted. We have taken a number of actions to be more responsive, transparent and accountable to Parliament and to Canadians since 2006. Canadians were tired of the old way of doing things and the old political model. That is why we promised the Federal Accountability Act as our first piece of legislation, and we delivered on our promise to Canadians. The act was the most sweeping anti-corruption legislation, following 13 years of Liberal corruption and mismanagement.

We are entrusted to operate and manage government for Canadians. We take that trust and responsibility seriously by respecting, in a wise and transparent manner, the hard-earned money that Canadian taxpayers have entrusted us with. One of the ways that our Conservative government took action to improve financial transparency was through a revamped reporting regime, including the creation of a non-partisan parliamentary budget office.

The range of services the government is responsible for is incredibly vast. We support our economic prosperity and competitiveness as a nation and we ensure public safety and security, as well as the well-being of our environment. However, those are just a couple of examples. There are many others. In each case, we make sure that Canadians are getting value for money and the accountability they expect and deserve from us.

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One can imagine that the incredible scope of what we do brings some pretty unique reporting challenges. For one, the decision-making process can take time. The budget process, for example, starts months in advance and we hold extensive consultations with Canadians.

Earlier in the debate, a member of the NDP suggested that we were just starting the new budget cycle. That is not particularly accurate. As MPs, we have been consulting with constituents since December. We held budget round tables in January. Right now, we are just submitting to the finance minister some of the information that we gathered from these meetings.

What happens after the budget? First, we have to make sure that we read the budget. After we have done that, the next step is a budget implementation bill. That is the part that takes all of the little components that have been described throughout the budget and includes them in legislation. We then see how the two tie together. For those people who took the time—and there were a few from the opposition who did, although not very many—to go to the technical briefings on budget implementation, they found out exactly why each of those things in the larger implementation bills fitted with the budget that had been presented. The first meeting lasted four hours and the second for six and a half hours. I am proud to say that I attended those. They gave me confidence to talk about our budget and to recognize that the items in it have been fully explained, and of which we should be proud.

All of this to say that our government operates within a very complex environment. However, this is still not an excuse to remain static. It just means that we must be that much more committed to taking the bold steps needed to transform how we serve Canadians and remain accountable to them.

• (1310)

That is exactly what our government has been doing. For example, we have strengthened the way we manage our financial resources and shown more accountability and transparency in reports, such as our quarterly financial reports.

Indeed, over the past few years the government has taken a number of steps to ensure that Parliament and Canadians are better informed about public spending. These include steps to improve financial reporting, which has vastly improved under our Conservative government. Specifically, for example, as I mentioned before, the government now prepares quarterly financial reporting on spending for departments, agencies and crown corporations. This requirement has been in place since April 2011. In doing so, we have taken a page from the private sector, where publicly traded companies have been required to publish quarterly financial reports for years. That is accountability. That is but one example of the government's leadership in supporting the work of parliamentarians as well as the work of independent bodies of Parliament such as the parliamentary budget office.

I would add that all public and some non-public reporting mechanisms are provided to the parliamentary budget office to support its efforts.

There are many other examples of our government's positive actions, which this motion gives us a chance to discuss and debate.

Our Conservative government's leadership is clearly evident in the fact that the Public Accounts of Canada, which is one of the most important accountability documents prepared by the government, has consistently received a clean opinion by the Auditor General of Canada. The bottom line is that our government is as committed as ever to providing more timely and relevant information on many and varied activities to parliamentarians and Canadians.

The government is also committed to responding to all requests for information with the appropriate publicly available information. Our record on transparency and accountability speaks for itself. We have followed up on our commitments with concrete action to provide an open and honest government that hard-working Canadians expect and deserve.

It was this government that created the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. We still believe in its mandate, as created in the Federal Accountability Act.

While the tax-and-spend NDP might like to see a needlessly overgrown bureaucracy, our Conservative government believes that the current structure of the parliamentary budget office can provide quality non-partisan analysis while respecting taxpayers' dollars.

• (1315)

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to add a little context to this debate.

First of all, there is a very difficult global economic situation. Canada has just lost its governor of the Bank of Canada. The finance minister was out today saying that he was going to bring in another austerity budget. Now the government is refusing to extend the mandate of the PBO.

Why are the Conservatives sending yet another negative signal to markets? Are they not concerned about the impacts this will have on our economy? Do they hate the PBO so much that they would risk market retaliation just to make a political point?

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Mr. Speaker, some of the words of the hon. member from the opposition are, I believe, somewhat beneath the debate we are having today.

I am a former mathematics teacher and have looked at things like ring permutations. As I mentioned to my students, if one looks at something and moves it around in a clockwise direction and then moves it farther up, one will see that it is going in an anti-clockwise direction. Unfortunately, that is the way politics is.

The government has to look at what is on the piece of paper. Wherever the opposition members are looking at it from, I have no idea.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, given the context in which the hon. member just stood and spoke on the issue, I am sure he can understand and appreciate the fact that we will soon have billions of tax dollars proposed as expenditures in the upcoming federal budget.

There would be a significant advantage to giving Mr. Page an extension as Parliamentary Budget Officer, because of his understanding of the process and numbers. In short, there is an argument to be made that extending Mr. Page's tenure to carry us over would make sense and give a great deal of value to all Canadians.

Business of Supply

As for what the hon. member just finished saying, if the government were genuine why would it not then allow an extension for Mr. Page? At the end of the day, all Canadians would benefit by seeing just that.

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the specific terms people have, we know that there is an end date, just as we knew there was an end date when the Auditor General Sheila Fraser left us.

When we look at the great work they have done, we appreciate it and we respect the situation that has taken place. We respect the role they have taken. The suggestion that has come forth is that there has been no preparation and that there is no opportunity for us to have a qualified replacement to continue the work, which is important work, of the Library of Parliament. I think that is perhaps the point that is missing in this debate.

• (1320)

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to hear my colleague's comments on the independence of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, a person who is chosen from a list put up by the Library of Parliament, a person who is clearly free to criticize or make comment. Nobody is restricting that ability to criticize.

Does the member find it a bit curious that according to the folks across the way, they and the media are the only people who seem to be allowed to comment on what the PBO puts out? In their view, we do not have the right, freedom or independence to question the PBO ourselves. Is that not a bit of a double standard?

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Mr. Speaker, our role as parliamentarians is to try to work our way through and take some responsibility ourselves for the types of things that are required. It seems that it is a little bit easier for the opposition to simply say, "We do not really want to do any work, but we will say that whatever has happened in this report or some other report is where we are going to hang our hats".

It is exactly as I mentioned earlier. We can all look at the same type of thing, but it depends on the political spin we are putting on it. It can have a clockwise spin or an anti-clockwise spin, but it the same thing we are talking about.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Joyce Bateman (Winnipeg South Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be here today to contribute to the debate on the Parliamentary Budget Officer position.

This gives me an opportunity to speak about our Conservative government's deep commitment to transparency and accountability to Parliament and the Canadian people.

I am particularly pleased to be speaking about the steps that we have taken so that Parliament and Canadians are better informed about how the government is spending taxpayers' hard-earned money.

This includes improving financial reports, a goal to which our government has contributed enormously.

[*English*]

I just have to mention that, as a chartered accountant myself, I am very grateful and very impressed with the incredible additions that have been made and the improvements that have been made in financial reporting under this Conservative government. I am very proud to be a part of it.

[*Translation*]

For instance, every department and agency now publishes its own annual financial statements about the nature and scope of its activities.

After 13 years of Liberal mismanagement, this innovation, which was introduced in 2006, is one of the principal means the government can use to report on the use of public funds.

Canada's leadership in terms of financial reporting is due to our government's management. Very few governments publish annual financial statements at the departmental level.

In addition, departments must attach to their annual financial reports a statement of management responsibility for internal monitoring of financial reports.

These statements have existed since 2010 and are part of a more rigorous approach to maintaining effective internal monitoring systems for financial reports.

Furthermore, our government introduced quarterly financial reports to increase transparency. This requirement has been in force since April 2011. It is based on the private sector's best practices, because for years now publicly traded companies have had to release quarterly financial reports.

These reports are indispensable for informed and timely decision-making. They show where the money has been spent over the past quarter and how this spending differs from spending in previous periods.

I would like to add that these quarterly reports are one of the many information sources that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has available to him for preparing his analyses.

I would like to point out that before our government came to power, parliamentarians received information about departmental spending only once a year. Their sources of information were the Public Accounts of Canada, which include the government's consolidated financial statements and are tabled several months after the end of the fiscal year.

All that changed when the quarterly financial reports were introduced. This increases not only the frequency of the financial reports presented to Parliament and to Canadians, but also their quality.

In addition to these changes, we implemented the proactive disclosure of financial information, such as travel expenses, hospitality expenses, contracts and grants and contributions.

Business of Supply

These proactive disclosures by the Conservative government are at the forefront of the growing open data movement in our government and in many others around the world. The movement unlocks the power of the vast quantities of data that we produce in order to report to citizens and taxpayers.

• (1325)

[English]

It is amazing to think of all the financial information available today on departmental websites for all Canadians to see.

I just want to repeat in English that we are truly part of this world movement to unleash data. The volume of information is incredible. It has helped to demonstrate Canada's leadership and our government's leadership in financial reporting, a leadership that is reflected in the annual publication of the "Public Accounts of Canada".

In fact, the Auditor General has given the financial statements of the Government of Canada, contained in the public accounts, which are among the most important accountability documents prepared by the government, a clean opinion for the past 14 years running. This attests to the high standards of the government's financial statements and reporting.

In the past few years, the Conservative government of Canada has also taken important steps to ensure that we have the financial expertise and frameworks in place to allow our organizations to fulfill their specific responsibilities for financial management as part of management. For example, we have elevated the role of the chief financial officer to reflect the vital function of managing today's complex environment.

Chief financial officers are part of a department's senior management team. They support and advise deputy heads on departmental financial management. Thanks to recent policy changes, they now report directly to their deputy heads and provide them with objective advice and department-wide perspectives on all business matters. This represents a significant change in the role, one that reflects, I might add, the evolution of the CFO's role in the private sector.

Allow me to mention one more notable development, the introduction of the departmental audit committees. Again, as a chartered accountant, I see the value and I see the proactive management because of their creation. These audit committees, made up of leading experts from both inside and outside government, have brought strategic guidance to the work of internal audits, along with advice on a range of management functions. It is a twofold benefit for the government and for every taxpayer. They ensure good governance, risk management, and financial control.

All of the changes I have been discussing are part of the new suite of financial management policies and an enhanced internal audit regime that we have introduced. They have greatly contributed to strengthening the way we manage public expenditures, and they represent just some of the ways we are providing more timely and relevant financial information to parliamentarians and to all Canadians.

Our government is as committed as ever to supporting parliamentarians in exercising their constitutional duty of holding the government to account for how it spends taxpayers' money. We

acknowledge the important mandate of the Parliamentary Budget Officer in supporting parliamentarians through the non-partisan analyses of economic data.

Over the past few years, our government has taken a number of actions to be more responsive, more transparent and more accountable to Parliament and to all Canadians. These actions complement the many steps parliamentarians have taken themselves to improve the oversight of government spending. I can assure this House that our government will continue to respond to requests for information with the appropriate publicly available information.

Our government has made managing the economy our top priority for the past seven years. Part of that commitment was the creation of the non-partisan parliamentary budget office within the Library of Parliament to conduct independent analyses of the Canadian economy. Quite frankly, the Library of Parliament is a wonderful resource for us all, and not only in this regard.

Our Conservative government has consistently demonstrated our commitment to economic stability and accountability. We will continue that commitment by maintaining the current structure of a credible, non-partisan parliamentary budget office.

• (1330)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a two-part question.

First, I would like to know if the hon. member believes that there should be a crossover between this Parliamentary Budget Officer and the new one. Should there be a period when they work together? I want to know if that would be a good idea.

Also, I want to know if she, as a former accountant, would recommend to her former customers going without accountability for months at a time. Is that something that is advisable? I would like to know the answer from the accountant.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: I want to clarify something, Mr. Speaker. I am not a former accountant. I am still a chartered accountant in Canada.

We value this position. We are the government that created this position so we have no intention of getting rid of it.

With respect to the other question of the hon. member, he has asked a parliamentarian to interfere in the hiring process. That is not what I want to do. As parliamentarians, it is important that we understand the difference between governance and management. We respect the leadership in the Public Service of Canada for its management decisions. It takes those decisions with our direction and our governance.

Business of Supply

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in reference to the Parliamentary Budget Officer, there is a need to ensure that there is a sense of independence, and I think all parliamentarians would acknowledge that. I have talked a great deal about the value that the Parliamentary Budget Officer brings to the House of Commons and through the House of Commons to all Canadians in terms of looking at the hard numbers and presenting those numbers in an independent fashion.

Does the member believe the Prime Minister should have the power to ultimately terminate the Parliamentary Budget Officer? What in her opinion should be the proper procedure if the government wanted to see the Parliamentary Budget Officer terminated? Who should have that power?

• (1335)

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Mr. Speaker, there is a misunderstanding on the part of the member for Winnipeg North because there is no termination in question at all here. The gentleman's term is up and we are replacing the gentleman, as we would in normal management throughout the Government of Canada.

With respect to his question about hypothesis, the reality is we are replacing this important role, which I might add the Prime Minister created. We are very proud to have created an environment of greater accountability for Canadians.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to come back to the answer to my colleague's question about the difference between governance and management. Clearly, it goes without saying that we do not want the government to take care of the management side of things. However, we know that the new Parliamentary Budget Officer will not be hired right away and so there will be a period of time in which we do not have a Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Would it not be acceptable to simply extend the mandate of the current Parliamentary Budget Officer by a few months, knowing that he is willing to stay in the position? Such a transition would allow the selection committee to do its job of managing.

Ms. Joyce Bateman: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his question. In my opinion, there is a very significant difference between management and governance, and we need to understand the needs associated with each of them. We want to respect the decisions of the head of the Library of Parliament. It is our decision.

[English]

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to read the motion we are debating today. While listening to the debate in the last little while, there seems to be a misunderstanding of what the opposition is moving.

The opposition has moved:

That this House: (a) reaffirm the essential role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer in providing independent analysis to Parliamentarians on the state of the nation's finances, trends in the Canadian economy, and the estimates process; and (b) call on the government to: (i) extend the mandate of current Parliamentary Budget Officer Kevin Page until his replacement is named; and (ii) support legislation to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament.

Taking all three components of the motion together, we are asking for support of the motion from a party that purports accountability but demonstrates very little of it in the House.

One of things the motion calls for is an extension of the mandate of the current Parliamentary Budget Officer until his replacement is named, and that seems to make common sense. It seems to make economic sense too. When we are dealing with billions of dollars, we would not want the position of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to be left vacant.

Mr. Speaker, I beg your indulgence. I am sharing my time with the member for Louis-Hébert.

However, the important part of the motion is that the Parliamentary Budget Officer be a full independent officer of Parliament, which is a critical component.

Members know that if a replacement for the Parliamentary Budget Officer is not named prior to the completion of Mr. Page's term on March 25, it is possible that the PBO may cease to function and the staff effectively returned to the Library of Parliament. After all, what would the staff have to do if the Parliamentary Budget Officer were no longer in place?

I am sure my friends across the way understand the business analogy that nobody would leave a key position that was in charge of accountability vacant. I am sure Conservative members would not argue that and I hope they will pay close attention to it.

On February 5, only days ago, the Conservatives used procedural tactics at the finance committee to block the extension of the PBO's term. We have to remember that the Parliamentary Budget Officer was appointed by the government. He has done a good job as Parliamentary Budget Officer, but the Conservatives do not want him around because he actually asks questions. He questions their figures. He questions their predictions. At times, the Conservatives have felt embarrassed by that.

However, that is not the fault of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. If the government is embarrassed, it is because of its own shortcomings. It is because the Conservatives gave the wrong information and guesstimated or underestimated costs they knew were much higher. At times, as we know, they had one set of books for the cabinet and other for the rest of Canadians, including members of Parliament.

What we are talking about is nothing that is unique to Canada. Members know that in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, South Korea, the Netherlands, Sweden and many other nations have, or plan to have, budget research officers to serve their national legislatures. The budget officer's job is not to rubber-stamp what the government does, but has a specific mandate, which I believe the budget officer has carried out with integrity.

• (1340)

The congressional budget office in the United States is the best known legislative budget office, with a staff of 235 professionals and a budget of \$46.8 million. That was in 2011.

Business of Supply

On the other hand, we know that our budget officer has 12 full-time staff with two interns and a budget of \$2.8 million. Despite those challenges, the Parliamentary Budget Officer has published 150 analytic reports. The office has been extremely busy. However, it has had very little choice. It has had to be busy because the government has been on a legislative rampage, rushing things through without thinking them through, without actually even costing them out and making up numbers. When it makes up numbers, the Parliamentary Budget Officer catches that. That is when the Conservatives start criticizing the budget officer.

In our motion, we have also asked that the new officer be an officer of Parliament rather than an officer of the Library of Parliament.

As we know, the PBO is an officer of the Library of Parliament and as such reports to the Speakers of both chambers. Officers of the Library of Parliament lack the independence held by officers of Parliament. The PBO is appointed by cabinet based upon a list of three names provided by the Library of Parliament.

However, officers of Parliament operate very differently. They carry out duties assigned to them by statutes and report to one or both the Senate or House of Commons. In most cases, officers of Parliament are appointed after consultation with the leader of every recognized party in the Senate and the House of Commons and after approval of the appointment by a resolution of the Senate and the House of Commons. How much more independence could one get than that?

Officers of Parliament currently include the Auditor General, the Commissioner of Official Languages, the Privacy Commissioner, the Access to Information Commissioner and the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Commissioner. That is what our party wants because we do not just say the words. This party actually believes in real accountability.

Since I have been in the House, I have seen attacks on the Parliamentary Budget Officer. I have also seen attacks on members of Parliament who want to carry out their parliamentary duties by giving due diligence to the budget as it goes through the House.

All we want to do is strengthen the outstanding work of the PBO across the board by making it more independent.

When I look at the fiasco around the F-35s and at ministers who have refused to hand over information, it is ridiculous. I cannot think of any other way to describe it.

This is a comment President of the Treasury Board made. On October 3, 2012, he stated this in the House of Commons when talking about the budget officer's mandate:

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

I have been a teacher for decades and that sentence on its own tells me how little regard my colleagues across the way have for accountability when they use mumbo-jumbo language like that to question the Parliamentary Budget Officer they have appointed to hold them accountable.

● (1345)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to reflect on another example where the Parliamentary Budget Officer demonstrated great value. The Government of Canada, through the Prime Minister when he was overseas, made the announcement that our seniors' pensions were in a huge crisis and as a result it would have to increase the retirement age from 65 to 67. Virtually instantaneously the leader of the Liberal Party came out in opposition saying that there was no crisis, that this was completely fictitious, that the government did not have to make the change and that there was nothing wrong with leaving the retirement age at 65. We have been advocating since then that it should remain at age 65.

A short while after, the Parliamentary Budget Officer reaffirmed through actual numbers that our pension program going forward was actually quite solid and we did not have to push any panic buttons. Would the member concur with my comments?

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, there is no crisis except that we have a Prime Minister who had to travel to foreign territory to make announcements about how we are going to continue to support our seniors, who built this amazing country. When the finance minister read the PBO's report he said, "unbelievable, unreliable, incredible". Those were his words.

When the PBO's report was matched with those of the Office of the Superintendent of Financial Institutions on old age security, which were tabled as the ninth and tenth actuarial reports in the fall of 2011, guess what? There was more coherence between those than the comments being made by my colleagues sitting across the aisle.

● (1350)

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, budget documents are complex things. One of the members mentioned a technical briefing where he did not see many NDP members. I would like to correct the record and say that we were probably in the majority in that room.

From the comments of backbench Conservative MPs, who do not understand the budget document, we need someone like the PBO. Could the member address the issue of not having a PBO for a period of maybe seven, eight or nine months? What are members going to do to inform themselves properly on the budget, especially Conservative backbenchers?

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, it is no surprise to Canadians or anyone in the House that the current government is very secretive. Either Conservatives announce so much at one time they bury really important things in thick documents or they just do not tell us the truth. We do not get the actual figures. We get a lot of things that are made up responses or non-answers as people read out prewritten answers to questions we ask about the budget.

I have been at committee where it has become very obvious that we absolutely need an independent Parliamentary Budget Officer and that budget officer needs to be an officer of Parliament with a statutory mandate so that Canadians can have confidence in their government.

Business of Supply

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, for once I gave a title to my speech, because I think it truly represents the state of mind in this House. The title is “Do they walk the talk?”

Normally, we would not have had to hold this opposition day. We would not have had to move this motion if the government had acted responsibly. If the government is late in appointing a senior public servant, it should have allowed for a transition period.

One wonders why, in recent years, since I have been here, important appointments have always been made late. The Conservatives know the calendar and they can follow it. Unfortunately, nothing is happening.

Therefore, I find it hard to understand why the Conservatives are first unable to follow a calendar and then unable to take responsibility for their mistake and do something really easy such as simply extending the mandate.

I now come to the crux of the issue. We live in a complex world. One of our main responsibilities here is to pass a complex budget. We have an institution that helps all parliamentarians do a good job and better understand what they vote on. It is Parliament's responsibility to pass the budget, but we must first understand that budget and know where it is going to take us.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer is an essential tool in a modern government. Let us not forget—as pointed out by many members—that this institution was created by the Conservative government. However, we get the feeling that they are not comfortable with what they created. Yet, and I rarely say this, that was a damn good idea.

If we look at the mandate as such, which is defined in section 79.2 of the Parliament of Canada Act, the Parliamentary Budget Officer can do things that are done in every modern government.

Incidentally, the budget of the Parliamentary Budget Officer and his staff is ridiculously low, compared to what we see elsewhere. For example, in the United States, the Congressional Budget Office operates with a staff of 250 and a budget of \$45 million. That is 16 times more than the resources available to our Parliamentary Budget Officer. Considering that the U.S. population is 10 times larger than ours, we can see that much more resources are provided to help members of Congress follow what could be called budget tentacles.

That is a strong trend among OECD members. A task force made up of senior OECD budget officials established a group that allows them to follow the parliamentary process, which is the equivalent of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Contrary to what the Conservatives say, we should not necessarily be following the best practices of the private sector, but rather the best practices of governments around the world. That is what the OECD is advocating and that is what we should be doing.

Last year, the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, of which I am a member, released a report entitled “Strengthening Parliamentary Scrutiny of Estimates and Supply”. Recommendation 15 states:

That the House of Commons give its Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates the mandate to undertake a study of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer;...that...the Committee should consider all structural models for the Office including, but not limited to, the Parliamentary Budget Officer reporting directly to Parliament.

● (1355)

Having the Parliamentary Budget Officer report to Parliament rather than the Library of Parliament has been discussed before. This would give him the powers he needs to do his job. Despite the roadblocks put in his way, he has done an outstanding job.

Consider the evaluation of the F-35 costs. It was not the Parliamentary Budget Officer but someone else who was out in left field. Despite the obstacles he faced, he managed to keep us and Canadians well informed. Obviously, the Parliamentary Budget Officer's role is to restore parliamentarians' ability to have some say in the budget process in order to provide more rigorous and exact oversight.

What I find ironic about this is that it was the Conservatives who suggested creating the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer. However, when the President of the Treasury Board was answering questions about why he was not providing information to the Parliamentary Budget Officer, he said that they are reporting to the House in the usual way. Thus, he is saying that what we had before worked better than what they created, which is nonsense.

That is a real-life example of not walking the talk, of someone who talks about open, transparent government and then hides behind the old approach to accountability. We want openness and transparency for parliamentarians, but also for Canadians who are interested in public affairs, and we want to move forward. We need to remember that we do not work in a vacuum; we work for the people of Canada. We tend to forget that we are accountable to Canadians and that we work for them. I find it hard to believe that anyone would want to limit the public's access to information.

I am happy to hear about open data, but we need to know what data will be open. If we are just talking about weather data, that will not make a big difference in our lives. That is why it is important to have an institution that allows us to analyze the implications of each of our decisions. That is always an issue—evaluating the consequences of various actions.

How will this affect our bottom line? How will it affect government operations? Before the institution of Parliamentary Budget Officer was created—and I can now say that it is an institution that we need—we were lost in a fog. And look at what happened when the Titanic got lost in the fog. We cannot have that happen.

At a time when we have a tight budget, we have a lot of debt and we are looking to maximize the effects of our budgetary measures, I feel it is important to have an institution that allows us to keep track of what is happening. The Parliamentary Budget Officer is a crucial tool. And I would like to take a moment to acknowledge his work and his courage. Given his mandate and the situation he was facing, it could not have been easy.

Statements by Members

Canadians need an independent office, in the name of transparency and accountability. [English]

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

• (1400)
[English]

SEX SELECTION

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, last year, Reggie Littlejohn successfully led international efforts to free blind Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng, who has fled four years of house arrest in China. Today, here in Ottawa, she asks parliamentarians to stand together against discrimination against girls occurring through sex selection.

Over decades, sex selection has caused a critical gender imbalance leading to human trafficking, kidnapping and sex slavery. Two hundred million girls are missing. As CBC reported, this is happening in Canada. The United Nations reports, “Renewed and concerted efforts are needed by governments and civil society to address the deeply rooted gender discrimination which lies at the heart of sex selection”.

We thank Reggie Littlejohn for her courage and determination to end discrimination against women and girls. We also thank her for calling on this Parliament to unite in its condemnation of discrimination against girls occurring through sex selection.

* * *

[Translation]

HEART MONTH

Mr. Dany Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, February is here, and I suggest we spend some time during the month of love talking about our hearts, because February is heart month in Canada.

It is important to know that 90% of Canadian adults have at least one risk factor for heart disease and stroke, which are among the leading causes of death in Canada. It is high time we reduced our risk by reducing tobacco consumption, being physically active, eating healthy food and reducing obesity rates in Canada, particularly among children, so that they can live longer, healthier lives.

This month, the Heart and Stroke Foundation launched its “Make Health Last” campaign. Soon, the message will be all over television, the Internet, newspapers and radio.

The foundation's annual report says that if baby boomers do not change their ways, many of them could spend their last years in sickness, disability and immobility. On average, Canadians will spend their final 10 years living with sickness.

We must act now.

BLACK HISTORY IN CANADA

Mr. Corneliu Chisu (Pickering—Scarborough East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to pay tribute to one of my constituents, Ms. Rella Braithwaite. Recently, I was honoured to attend Rella's 90th birthday party.

Born in Listowel, Ontario, Rella is a direct descendant of African Americans who travelled the route of the underground railway into Canada. In 1943, Rella moved to Scarborough with her husband, Bob, becoming one of the first black families to live in Scarborough. She became a self-educated writer and researcher of black history so that others would be able to learn and appreciate their rich heritage. Her career has impacted thousands of students and educators across Canada in the African Canadian community.

Rella Braithwaite has been recognized for her efforts with numerous awards and writing credits, and is considered a national role model and a rich source of information within the African Canadian community. Her daughter, Diana, an acclaimed blues singer and songwriter, has also followed in her footsteps.

I thank Ms. Braithwaite for her contributions to her community in Scarborough and to our great country.

* * *

FOOD BANK FUNDRAISING

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, every year more Canadian families are forced to rely on food banks. Year after year, Cape Breton's generosity always shines through when farmers, organizations, individuals and companies, such as the CBC, step up to the plate and undertake an event that helps those in need.

I rise today to recognize CBC Cape Breton's 6th annual Light Up a Life fundraiser, which raised over \$65,000.

Light up Life proceeds went toward Feed Nova Scotia, an organization that helps collect and distribute food to over 150 food banks, shelters, soup kitchens, breakfast programs, prepared meal services and emergency food assistance programs. Feed Nova Scotia looks after 25,000 hungry Nova Scotians, which would not be possible without fundraisers such as Light up a Life.

Therefore, I congratulate all volunteers and organizations from this year's Light up a Life event for their dedication, generosity and participation in making this campaign an immense success.

Statements by Members

●(1405)

DUCKS UNLIMITED

Mr. Robert Sopuck (Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today marks the 75th anniversary of one of North America's premier conservation organizations, Ducks Unlimited. Over the last three-quarters of a century, Ducks Unlimited has conserved 6.3 million acres of critical wetlands and completed over 9,000 conservation projects. In fact, DU's very first wetland conservation project was at Big Grass Marsh, located in the great constituency of Dauphin—Swan River—Marquette.

True conservationists, such as Ducks Unlimited, understand the stewardship values of those who work and use the land: Canada's hunters, anglers and farmers. Waterfowl hunters, more than any other group, have a deep and abiding commitment to waterfowl and wetland conservation. Waterfowl hunters form the backbone of all waterfowl conservation initiatives.

DU was instrumental in creating the North American waterfowl management plan, regarded by many as the most successful conservation program in history. I congratulate Ducks Unlimited on their conservation achievements and wish them continued success.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Mr. Kennedy Stewart (Burnaby—Douglas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, every time the NDP confronts Conservatives about their devastating cuts to science funding, the government refuses to give Canadians the straight goods about its war on science.

However, the truth is that this year the Conservative government has cut almost \$700 million in funding for science. This 6% cut has blown a massive hole in the budgets of key federal agencies and is having a real impact on the front lines of scientific research. Labs are powering down. Research groups are being disbanded. Students are dropping out of graduate programs. With each closure, each cut, each cancelled scholarship, and despite the best efforts of our country's greatest minds, science in Canada loses ground.

However, scientists are fighting back. They are mobilizing across the country to keep their labs open, ensure their students will have the same opportunities to succeed and help restore Canada's once sterling international reputation.

New Democrats value our scientific community and pledge to support scientists in any way we can to help end this war on science.

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COMMUNITY CENTENNIALS

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer, CPC): Mr. Speaker, when the Reverend Dr. Leonard Gaetz chose his homestead on the Red Deer River and became the local land agent for the area, it was not long before rail lines were built to cross the river and other settlers were discovering the rich, fertile soil of central Alberta.

From this beginning, we now have a year of celebration in my riding, as Red Deer, Sylvan Lake and Delburne are all marking centennials. The hard work and vision of Leonard Gaetz laid down the foundation for the incorporation of these three municipalities.

Red Deer is an extraordinary place. It has a vibrant economy, beautiful landscape and great people. There are many centennial events taking place throughout the year. Delburne will be celebrating its centennial in June. Red Deer will be hosting a homecoming festival in June and an old-fashioned fall fair on September 21. Sylvan Lake will kick it up with the Dance of the Century on June 15.

I encourage all Canadians to visit our great region and take in the celebration. Happy 100th birthday to the city of Red Deer, the town of Sylvan Lake and the village of Delburne.

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LUNAR NEW YEAR

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to wish a happy lunar new year, the year of the snake, to all those in the Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese communities.

Lunar new year is a beautiful, centuries old tradition, a festive time to be with family and friends and to celebrate a new year of possibilities. I am honoured that in my riding of Don Valley West, such a rich diversity of communities mark this special time and show that deep values of kinship and friendship are truly universal.

Don Valley West is home to the Korean Canadian Cultural Centre. I send a special greeting to all in the Korean community. With this being the year of Korea and Korean War veterans, I am certain that this lunar new year has special significance in celebrating not only a new year but also 50 years of diplomacy and shared history between Canada and Korea.

I hope that all enjoy time with their loved ones in celebrating the coming year of the snake. I wish everyone a prosperous and joyous year ahead.

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●(1410)

[Translation]

NORTEL

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on Friday, I had a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Poulain at my riding office.

Mrs. Poulain is a Nortel retiree. Her pension was cut in half, and she is worried about the future. We recently learned that Justice Winkler failed to get the various parties to reach an agreement on how to divide over \$9 billion in Nortel assets.

Three former executives were recently acquitted of fraud charges. Over \$750 million in fees have already been racked up since the beginning of the Nortel saga.

How is it possible that, in a society like ours, vultures are allowed to devour the pensions of the workers who helped make Nortel an industry leader? Why is the Conservative government doing absolutely nothing to help Nortel retirees?

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[English]

LUNAR NEW YEAR

Ms. Wai Young (Vancouver South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on behalf of our government, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all Canadians a happy lunar new year.

This week we say goodbye to the year of the dragon as we welcome the year of the snake. During lunar new year Canadians, particularly those of Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean heritage, will be celebrating with family and friends, sharing lisee, which are like lucky pockets, attending cultural events and enjoying many delicious special foods and meals.

On Sunday, February 17, the 40th annual Chinatown Spring Festival will be celebrated in my hometown of Vancouver. This annual festival includes a popular parade, spectacular performances and a community dinner. Thousands of people participate throughout the day.

I encourage all of my colleagues in the House and Canadians across the country to find an event in their community and join in celebrating the year of the snake.

Gong hey fat choy. Xie nien kwai le. Happy new year.

* * *

[Translation]

MIKAEL KINGSBURY

Ms. Laurin Liu (Rivière-des-Mille-Îles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, with the Sochi Olympic Games just 12 months away, Mikael Kingsbury, a young athlete from Deux-Montagnes, has never been closer to seeing his dreams come true, having won the first three events at the freestyle skiing World Cup.

As members may recall, he had a historic season last year when he reached the podium in all 13 moguls competitions in which he took part. He took the top spot on the podium eight times, thereby becoming the youngest Crystal Globe winner in the history of freestyle skiing.

His consistency, attention to detail and perseverance are an inspiration to his thousands of fans. We hope that this 20-year-old athlete who has already achieved 25 World Cup podium finishes will reach his full potential and have the best performance of his career in Sochi. What more could we wish him?

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[English]

LEADER OF THE NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Ms. Joan Crockatt (Calgary Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the member for Calgary Centre, I know a thing or two about blizzards,

Statements by Members

and I sympathize with Canadians from Quebec and Ontario who are facing a record snowfall and blizzard tomorrow.

When we face this type of winter weather, Canadians show their resilience by coming together, staying warm and beating the elements. Of course to keep their homes warm, they need electricity and gas. If the NDP leader gets his way, it will cost Canadians more to heat their homes and stock up on groceries. The NDP leader's \$20 billion job-killing carbon tax would make it more expensive to beat the cold.

While the leader of the NDP is on the side of old man winter, our Conservative government will stand against and defend Canadians from the \$20 billion job-killing carbon tax.

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[Translation]

MCGILL LAW STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Hon. Irwin Cotler (Mount Royal, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to commemorate and celebrate the 100th anniversary of the McGill Law Students Association.

[English]

The history of the Law Students Association is a most distinguished and storied one. When it was formed in 1912, there were but 62 law students at McGill, and the inaugural executive was comprised of four members, two of whom were later wounded in World War I.

Today, McGill is home to some 600 law students, all of whom benefit from the services provided by the LSA, be they student clubs, athletics, lectures, clinics or the traditional Thursday coffee house. Indeed, its centennial coffee house is scheduled for next Thursday with all former executives invited, a group which includes members of the bench and bar, justices of the Supreme Court of Canada, professors and legal scholars, and even the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Eglinton—Lawrence.

Indeed, I recall warmly the time I spent on the LSA executive in the 1960s, serving as its president from 1963 to 1964. It is hard to believe that is some 50 years ago. I congratulate all the students of McGill on this milestone anniversary, and I wish the LSA 100 more years. *Félicitations!*

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●(1415)

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Bev Shipley (Lambton—Kent—Middlesex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is engaged in the most ambitious pro-trade plan in Canadian history. Unfortunately, the NDP has consistently tried to sabotage these new opportunities for Canada's exporters.

Oral Questions

In fact, last year the NDP's Canada-U.S. border critic supported calls to end negotiations for a free trade agreement with the European Union. This week, joining a coalition of activists speaking out against free trade with the European Union is the union representing the writers of the questions for the NDP leader in the Office of the Leader of the Opposition, the OLO. The NDP staffers union joining such a campaign is further proof of the NDP's ideological anti-trade agenda, an agenda that not long ago sent an anti-trade mission to Washington to lobby against Canadian jobs.

On the positive side, since forming government, we have concluded a number of trade agreements that are opening new markets for Canadians and creating jobs. We will continue our pro-jobs and economic growth trade agenda for Canada.

* * *

ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party now admits it blanketed the good people of Saskatchewan with robocalls.

The intent of the call was to illegitimately influence the work of the non-partisan federal electoral boundaries commission. One Saskatchewan Conservative MP correctly called this practice deceptive. Yet the Prime Minister stood in the Houses to defend this despicable practice. He also stated, "These efforts will continue".

As a *Star Phoenix* editorial pointed out, this practice is a "prelude to gerrymandering, and it's intolerable". The not-so-mysterious voice in the robocall suggested that the commission's work was betraying Saskatchewan's values. However, what is a betrayal of Saskatchewan's values and Canadian values are the actions of the Conservative Party, shamelessly supported by the Prime Minister.

* * *

CONSERVATIVE PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it has been seven years since Canadians placed their confidence, trust and unwavering support in this Conservative government. Since then we have kept our promises. We have delivered results. We will continue to work hard for this great nation. Our government remains focused on the economy, on families, safe communities and pride in being a Canadian citizen.

Unfortunately, the Leader of the Opposition and his party have a different agenda that will hurt Canada and hurt Canadians. Listed on page 4 of the NDP's party platform, in black and white, is a \$20 billion carbon tax. In fact, the Leader of the Opposition even said that of course he has a cap-and-trade program that "will produce billions".

Our government will continue to fight this job-killing, \$20 billion carbon tax, stand up for Canada and make sure that we make all Canadian citizens proud of what we do as a government.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Prime Minister stated in this House that there were no problems concerning any fraudulent calls from Conservatives in Saskatchewan.

By refusing to identify themselves and using a partisan script, they violated CRTC rules. The Prime Minister should apologize for the calls that his own deputy House leader described as deceptive.

What will the government do to ensure that the Conservative Party respects the commission's non-partisan process?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the rules were followed, in the same way the NDP followed them when they did the same thing.

The commission's process involves getting input from the public, including political parties and parliamentarians. The members of our party will continue to express their concerns over these changes.

[English]

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister is ignoring the fact that his own MPs, including his deputy House leader, are calling this a deception.

This is not about the normal work of MPs just trying to have their voices heard by the commission. It is about the use of a shell company to carry out anonymous robocalls designed to deceive people.

Can the Prime Minister confirm for the House when he became aware of this deception, and can he explain whether the Government of Canada approves of the Conservative Party's use of deceptive and fraudulent methods?

● (1420)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, obviously I regret that categorization. In fact not only have the rules here been followed, but in the very same way as the NDP, which has done exactly the same thing.

The party's position on the boundary changes in Saskatchewan is public. It is extremely well known. It is not a matter of any mystery to people. We continue to urge the commission to look at changes, as do a large percentage of the people of Saskatchewan.

That is part of the process to get this kind of political input, and we will continue to make our voices heard.

ETHICS

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Senate ethics reached a new low this week with Senator Mike Duffy ducking out of the kitchen to avoid accountability, and reports of Senator Brazeau using a false address to avoid paying income tax and now news of his arrest.

Will the Prime Minister confirm that he has kicked Senator Brazeau out of the Conservative caucus? Will the Prime Minister tell Canadians what the government will be doing to recoup any and all money ripped off of taxpayers by his Conservative senators?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think it is known that in light of the serious events that have been reported today, I have removed Senator Brazeau from the Conservative caucus.

Obviously, I think our understanding is that these are matters of a personal nature rather than of Senate business, but they are very serious and we expect they will be dealt with through the courts.

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[Translation]

PARLIAMENTARY BUDGET OFFICER

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives' repeated attacks on the Parliamentary Budget Officer are proof positive that this office should be completely independent so that no government can ever hinder its work. That is why we are asking that the PBO be recognized as a full, independent officer of Parliament, like the Auditor General.

Will they support this reasonable request?

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course we want an impartial parliamentary budget office that is a credible source of opinions on fiscal matters.

The Library of Parliament has hired a headhunting firm, as it should. We are respect this process and we want the opposition to do the same.

[English]

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there must be something in this year's budget that the Conservatives do not want anyone to find.

What else would explain their refusal to extend the PBO's mandate, a mandate they created to supposedly bring fiscal transparency and accountability? The government has done everything it can to ignore and block the PBO.

If the Conservatives are not hiding anything, why will the Minister of Finance not extend the current Parliamentary Budget Officer's mandate until a successor is in place?

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to again assure the House that we want to see a parliamentary budget office that is non-partisan and a credible source of opinion on fiscal matters. We understand that the parliamentary library, an institution with over a

Oral Questions

hundred years of service to this chamber, is retaining a search firm. We respect that process.

I would direct the hon. member, if she is worried about what the budget will say, to listen to the budget speech, whenever that is delivered, and to the public accounts and the estimates of the Government of Canada.

* * *

ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister said yesterday that he followed the rules when he interfered in a quasi-judicial process with anonymous robocalls.

However, the parliamentary secretary to the government House leader says exactly the opposite. He says that failing to identify the party as the culprit is wrong. He says it is deceptive. He says that making these calls, anonymous or not, is something he would never do.

Now that he is so bluntly contradicted by the parliamentary secretary, would the Prime Minister join in asking the CRTC to investigate this matter?

• (1425)

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is no violation of CRTC rules in this case, unlike what the Liberal Party did in a very different case.

The fact of the matter is that the party has said there was a mistake made here and has clarified that.

What the Liberal members says about the process is just completely false. In fact, there were actually parliamentary hearings on this very subject of electoral boundaries. So, obviously, the process is to garner opinion—and, by the way, not just his opinion, but the opinion of all members of Parliament.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association, representing 80% of where Saskatchewan people live, has strongly supported the new map. So have dozens of other Saskatchewan people.

And about the legislation back in the 1990s, the now Prime Minister—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Wascana still has the floor.

The hon. member for Wascana.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Speaker, about the legislation back in the 1990s, the now Prime Minister said he accepted the previous government's intent at the time, and the Conservatives voted for it.

However, this time, there are Conservative robocalls to hide the identity of the party and pre-canned Conservative postcards are reportedly showering the commission, all designed to subvert the process.

Why is the Prime Minister attacking Judge Mills and Professor Courtney?

Oral Questions

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, hundreds of people in Saskatchewan oppose the proposals. They also have a right to their opinion, including those in rural Saskatchewan in particular, which I know the hon. member is notorious for not caring about.

However—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The Right Hon. Prime Minister still has the floor. Members need to come to order.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper: Mr. Speaker, the record will show very clearly that the Liberal government suspended this process in the 1990s when it did not like the map, something that we on this side of the House were completely against and ultimately successfully fought, allowing the process to continue to go ahead.

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[Translation]

TAXATION

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, under the Conservatives, mortgage debt has increased by 77% and other debt has exploded by 56%. At the same time, the Conservatives have added \$750 million to workers' tax burden with three consecutive increases in employment insurance contributions.

Can the minister explain how these tax increases will help Canadian families pay off their debts?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is this government, this side of the House, that has reduced Canadians' taxes 140 times since it came into office.

Unlike the previous Liberal government, our government has put \$3,100 in the pockets of the average Canadian family. We will continue to implement our plan in order to reduce the taxes of all Canadian families.

* * *

[English]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Peter Julian (Burnaby—New Westminster, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the environment commissioner was clear that the failure of the government to act puts not just our environment and our health but also our economy at risk.

The government's record? After years of promises, it failed to put into place liability protection, risking billions of dollars in cleanup costs that would devastate the economy. And, of course, federal regulations limiting greenhouse gases for the oil and gas sector are completely missing. They are AWOL, like a Tory senator in Prince Edward Island.

Why is the minister refusing to act? Why is he putting our environment and our economy at risk?

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for the question, because it gives me an opportunity to remind him that it is under our government that we

have seen a stabilization of greenhouse gas emission growth in this country, while our economy grew, which is something the NDP does not want to see.

I would also like to remind my colleague opposite of what the environment commissioner said on his body of work on a television program two days ago: "I have more confidence in this system than I did going in".

Our government is getting the job done.

[Translation]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of the Environment is not going to shirk his responsibility with respect to hydraulic fracturing as easily as that.

His Parliamentary Secretary should read the law. Section 2 of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act states that the government must assess all substances to determine whether they are toxic and understand the risk they pose. Section 48 provides for the establishment of an inventory of releases of pollutants. Section 50 states that the minister must publish the inventory. And there is more.

Will the minister finally require companies to identify the toxic substances being injected into the ground?

• (1430)

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have said numerous times in the House, I would like to remind my colleague opposite that this is a matter of primary provincial jurisdiction. Our government has a world-renowned chemical management plan by which we assess thousands of toxic chemicals. Again, I would remind my colleague of what the environment commissioner said of his report: "...this is how the system is supposed to work. We've identified...gaps, and the government is committed to closing them".

Again, our government is getting the job done for Canada's environment.

Mr. Robert Chisholm (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the commissioner also had strong words about the Conservatives' failure to protect our coastline. Less than 1% of Canadian marine areas are protected, which is a long way away from our UN commitment to protect 10% by 2020. The commissioner warned that at the current pace, it would be decades before we would be able to achieve our 2020 goal. Our oceans and fisheries do not have decades.

Is the minister still committed to the 2020 goal, and what is his plan to achieve it?

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to my colleague opposite, this is what the environment commissioner said of our marine protected areas: "I think when you look at the 10 marine protected areas that have been created, this is an important achievement....I think it is a good foundation".

Oral Questions

Our government has plans to achieve several more marine protected areas. We are undertaking robust consultations, because we understand that the process to get this right is important. It is under our government that we have seen an increase of over 50% of Canada's natural areas being protected under our park system. This is the true record of our government.

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[Translation]

PUBLIC SAFETY

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when I spoke about Arthur Porter this week, instead of spouting the usual platitudes, the Conservatives took out a nice little blue sheet on which was written simply, “Well, he is no longer there.”

That is not enough to erase the connection between this individual and the Conservatives. It does not excuse them for the mistake they made by appointing him to the Security Intelligence Review Committee. Since that time, the Prime Minister's Office secretly changed the rules for this type of appointment. If that is not admitting to making a mistake, I do not know what is.

So, while they are at it, why do the Conservatives not just admit that they should never have put a notorious fraudster in this key position?

[English]

Hon. Vic Toews (Minister of Public Safety, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Arthur Porter submitted his resignation. It was accepted almost two years ago.

The leaders of the NDP and the Liberal Party were consulted ahead of his appointment and had no objections to that appointment. The allegations that Mr. Porter is facing do not have anything to do with his former responsibilities.

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[Translation]

ETHICS

Mr. Alexandre Boulerice (Rosemont—La Petite-Patrie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the process for making CSIS appointments appears to be about as good as the one for appointing senators.

We have seen a never-ending string of scandals and abuses of public funds by senators appointed by the Conservative politburo. Senator Brazeau, who has broken the law for years, has now been arrested following a very disturbing incident. And Senator Duffy continues to claim, against all evidence to the contrary, that he lives in Prince Edward Island. Do not look for him today because he is probably hiding in a kitchen somewhere. These people continue to be paid handsomely, even though they are cheaters and fraudsters.

The Prime Minister appointed them and therefore he is responsible for them. Will he get tough and put an end to this abuse?

[English]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as members well know, we have asked the Standing Senate Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets

and Administration to ensure that the Senate's policies are indeed followed, that they are adhered to, and indeed that they are appropriate. That is exactly the process that is taking place right now.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister promised to clean up Ottawa, and he gave us Mike Duffy.

Did members see the footage of him running out of that kitchen last night in Halifax? It is like Senator Come-From-Away is on the lam. It is because the good people of Cavendish are saying: “What do Anne of Green Gables and Mike Duffy have in common? They are both fictional residents of Prince Edward Island”.

Does anybody believe that the Senate is going to hold him to account? Not if the Prime Minister appointed him.

What is he going to do to get all the taxpayers' money back? It is a simple question.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is well understood that parliamentarians, members of the House of Commons and the Senate are expected to maintain residences in the region they represent as well as here in the national capital region so they can do their work here. The Senate has rules that cover that. Those are currently being reviewed, and they are also reviewing to make sure that all senators in fact adhere to those rules, as we expect they will.

● (1435)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the question is this: When did ripping off the taxpayer became part of the job description of the Conservative Senate?

Let us look at this question of the very unsavoury story of Mr. Patrick Brazeau. We have had allegations of tax fraud on top of earlier reports of him ripping us off for a housing allowance.

Kicking him out of the caucus is not good enough. The Prime Minister appointed him to the Senate for the next 35 years, which means taxpayers are on the hook for over \$7 million. When is the Conservative government going to take responsibility for Mr. Brazeau, kick him out of the Senate and get every taxpayer dime back? Period. Simple question.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, with regard to Senator Brazeau, the reports today are, of course, a serious matter related to a domestic incident, and this will be dealt with by authorities through the appropriate process. As for his role here, in light of the serious nature of the events, action has been taken, and he has been removed from the caucus.

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[Translation]

ELECTORAL BOUNDARIES

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us go back to the fraudulent calls in Saskatchewan.

There is a process to voice objections and that process must be respected. It is unacceptable to attack an independent commission by making robocalls.

Oral Questions

In response to my question yesterday, the Prime Minister defended the fraudulent calls. In the House, he is the leader of the government, not the leader of his party.

Will the government ensure that the Conservatives respect the process?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course, we respect and celebrate the independence of the electoral boundaries commission. We all made presentations before it, as did the NDP, and they are asking for some changes as well. It is our right and responsibility, as members of Parliament, to represent the wishes of our constituents. Three-quarters of the people in Saskatchewan are upset with the maps the way they are drawn, and it is our job to continue those arguments.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives want us to believe that these calls were routine, but they were not. It was a push poll from a front company in an effort to manipulate and deceive. Conservatives knew that this was wrong, and that is why they denied involvement for five days, until they were caught and they had to confess. That is why they did these calls anonymously.

Will the government now stand up for the integrity of the commission and urge the Conservative Party to end its deceptive practices?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is an interesting question coming from the NDP. Allow me to quote the Quebec caucus chair, a member of the NDP caucus, when he was asked about anonymous robocalls that were made to a formerly NDP-held riding: “This is not our way of doing things so I would be extremely surprised if it came from us”.

It was a categorical denial, but only days later, the party spokeswoman admitted that the NDP made the calls, said that she thought they were legal and that they promised to use more of them, including to raise funds. That is the NDP record on robocalls.

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INFRASTRUCTURE

Ms. Judy Foote (Random—Burin—St. George's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while the Minister of Finance is warning Canadians his next budget will be yet another disappointment, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and the Canada West Foundation are calling for a new long-term infrastructure funding deal. Because the current deal expires in just 14 months, there is uncertainty around proceeding with planning for municipalities.

Will the finance minister acknowledge the seriousness of this issue and commit to a long-term infrastructure deal in budget 2013?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to say how proud I am of this government for all of the budgets it put forward in the economic action plan. It has led to over 900,000 net new jobs created, and we are going to continue in that vein with budget 2013. But I have to tell

my Liberal colleagues that they are just going to have to wait, because we are not going to speculate on what is going to be in the budget. A few more sleeps and they will know exactly what is in it.

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EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which represents thousands of small businesses across the country, has called the payroll tax increases a regressive, job-killing policy. Let us be very clear about this. If the government raises payroll taxes, many Canadians working in small business will clearly lose their jobs. That is what I said: lose their job, not find one.

Why is it that the Conservative government is insisting on this job-killing payroll tax at a time of economic hardship, which is clearly going to put more Canadians out of work?

● (1440)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we made a commitment to taxpayers that we would keep the EI account in balance, unlike the Liberals, who raided it for almost \$60 billion for their own purposes.

We created a new structure so that EI premiums would not rise dramatically. In fact, we have limited the increases to 5¢ per year until the account does come into balance. That is so we can protect Canadians' jobs.

* * *

[Translation]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Commissioner of the Environment confirmed that the government did not require companies engaged in hydraulic fracturing to be transparent. These companies are not required to inform the public about some 800 chemicals that they may inject into the ground, chemicals that may contaminate our drinking water.

How can the government regulate products when it cannot confirm their use, and how can it manage the risks associated with toxic products when it does not even know the quantity used for shale gas development?

[English]

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned earlier, hydraulic fracking is an area of primarily provincial jurisdiction. However, I absolutely love it when a Liberal member gets up to ask about environmental policy, because it allows me to talk about their record: a 30% increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Under our government, we have seen a stabilization while the economy grew.

Oral Questions

The Liberals signed on to the Kyoto protocol, which included a small minority of global emitters. We are committed to an international agreement that has all major emitters. While they saw a carbon tax, we have a sector-by-sector regulatory approach that is getting the job done.

I am so glad our government has this file.

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INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, negotiators from the EU are in Ottawa again this week to discuss trade with Canada. New Democrats believe we should broaden and deepen our trade ties with Europe, because Europe is an ideal partner. It is a modern, dynamic economy with high standards and respect for the rule of law. However, Canadians do not just want any deal they can get. Canadians want a good deal.

Will the Conservatives commit to this House that the interests of farmers, our seniors and our local municipalities will not be sacrificed at the negotiating table?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I know the NDP members are trying to shift all over the spectrum these days, but they are not going to fool anyone with that one.

The fact of the matter is that this is a party that is so ideologically opposed to trade, its foreign affairs critic actually already called for Canada to pull out of the talks some time ago. We would not even be discussing this with the European Union if the NDP had its way. It is very consistent, since it opposed trade with NAFTA, every other trade deal we have had, and even the Auto Pact.

The only people who pursue responsible trade are on this side of the aisle.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the only people being fooled are those who believe that the Conservatives are good, competent negotiators in trade.

These are important talks, but the Conservatives have refused to conduct them in an open and accountable manner. They refuse to give information to Canadian taxpayers or brief this Parliament. Canadians had to find out from European negotiators that the Conservatives are considering concessions that would limit local economic development.

Can the government assure Canadians that CETA will protect Canadian communities' rights to invest in local initiatives to create jobs in our communities?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the trade deals this country has are basic to its economic prosperity. The free trade deal signed by an historic Conservative government with the United States is the basis of a lot of the prosperity we have today.

We will never let the ideologues on that side of the House tear that up or the Auto Pact or anything else they want to tear up. We will make sure we have good and diverse trade throughout this country.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let me help the Prime Minister. As an auto worker for 32 years, there is no Auto Pact, and it was not this side that tore it up.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

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

● (1445)

Mr. Malcolm Allen: Mr. Speaker, Canadian farmers are becoming increasingly concerned about the contents of leaked reports from the EU trade negotiations. The idea of pitting one sector of Canadian agriculture against another is a worrisome development, especially so if these negotiations are intended to be a clear precedent for further trade negotiations in the agriculture sector.

Could the Minister of Agriculture guarantee all farmers that their livelihoods will not be used as a bargaining chip and he will not leave them out in the cold?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Once again, Mr. Speaker, let us be clear about the record.

The integrated Canadian-American auto sector that we have today, which is so fundamental to the prosperity of southern Ontario, was opposed tooth and nail by the New Democratic Party in the 1960s, as it has opposed every trade initiative since because of its socialist ideology. The fact is that we see that party once again opposing a trade deal with the European Union before one is even signed.

We will protect and promote the economic development—

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

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that is not reassuring. Supply management is not negotiable because it is essential to the survival—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Berthier—Maskinongé has the floor.

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau: Mr. Speaker, supply management is not negotiable because it is essential to the survival of many communities. In Quebec, agriculture is one of the main economic engines of rural communities. People living in the regions rely on these farms to support suppliers and local industries, including the cheese industry.

Consulting these communities must be part of the fundamentals related to the signing of a trade agreement with the European Union.

What protections did the Minister of Agriculture get for these industries?

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is well known that we protect supply management. It is protected in all our trade negotiations.

By contrast, the NDP forgot to mention supply management in its election platform. We are well aware that the NDP continues to oppose the free trade agreement with the United States. That position is completely at odds with the position taken by every provincial party, by every party in Quebec at the time.

Oral Questions

[English]

JUSTICE

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, restoring the confidence of Canadians in our criminal justice system has been, and continues to be, an ongoing priority for this government.

Since being first elected in 2006, we have passed over 30 measures aimed at keeping our streets and our communities safe. These include ending early parole for murderers, tougher penalties on impaired driving, raising the age of consent and eliminating the use of house arrest for serious crimes such as sexual assault and kidnapping.

Could the Minister of Justice please update the House on what is next for our government on our justice agenda?

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to inform the House that we will take action to reform the Criminal Code provisions related to high-risk individuals found not criminally responsible. Canadians and victims have expressed concerns that violent individuals could be released back into the community, so we will take action to ensure that public safety comes first.

The member is correct. We have passed many justice measures, including tougher penalties for gun crimes, auto theft, white collar crime and serious drug offences. I hope that for once we can count on the support of the opposition parties in our efforts to stand up for victims and law-abiding Canadians.

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this morning, we learned that the Minister of Human Resources set a \$430 million employment insurance reduction quota across the country. That quota is \$120 million in Quebec alone. In 2009, the government cut \$200 million across the country.

Why did this amount double? It is because there are quotas and the minister thinks honest job seekers are criminals. The minister's reform is punishing people who are looking for work. When will she reverse her decision?

• (1450)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is completely untrue. Employment insurance is there for people who are entitled to benefits. Unfortunately, there are some cheaters in the system. Last year, Service Canada had to stop close to half a billion dollars in ineligible payments.

Stealing from unemployed workers is serious. That is why we must safeguard the integrity of our employment insurance system.

Mr. Philip Toone (Gaspésie—Îles-de-la-Madeleine, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I reject the premise of that answer.

When we discovered that the minister was imposing quotas, she defended herself by calling unemployed workers bad guys. The employment insurance reduction quotas are higher in Quebec than

anywhere else in the country. She needs to stop telling us that this reform is good for workers. That is not true. This reform abandons the regions and shows that the government does not understand the reality of seasonal workers.

Can the minister explain to my constituents why they are being held in such contempt?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are doing more to help unemployed workers find jobs. That is the best thing we can do for them. Unfortunately, Service Canada had to stop close to a billion dollars in ineligible payments last year. What is more, hundreds of millions of dollars are connected to fraud.

That is unacceptable. Stealing from unemployed workers is serious. That is why we must safeguard the integrity of the system.

[English]

Mr. Mike Sullivan (York South—Weston, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the truth is EI is not there when Canadians need it.

The system is in such a mess, people cannot even find a Service Canada location. According to the website, the closest one to my office is at 605 Rogers Road, but Service Canada closed that one last October. Do not try the office at Attwell Drive, the website says that it is open Thursday mornings, but that has not been the case in over a month. It is ridiculous.

How can we trust Conservatives to manage EI when they cannot even manage a website?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians have a number of ways to find out information about EI. They can what we say “click, call or connect”. They can go onto the website and ask questions there. They can call 1-800-O-Canada. Over 90% of the Canadian population does live within 15 kilometre of one of our 600 Service Canada outlets across the country.

We are there to help Canadians access the benefits to which they are entitled, and we will continue to do there.

[Translation]

Mr. Jonathan Tremblay (Montmorency—Charlevoix—Haute-Côte-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if the minister does not want to listen to the NDP or the tens of thousands of people protesting out east, maybe she will listen to her own party.

Michel-Éric Castonguay, a Conservative Party candidate who lost in my riding during the last election, has said that he does not understand why the Conservatives are insisting on pushing this reform. He said that the minister is punishing the unemployed and that the regions will suffer. Better yet, he criticized the minister's sugar coating of the situation. He said, “We have to call a spade a spade. For goodness' sake, quotas are quotas.”

Why are the Conservatives abandoning the regions?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what the hon. member said is not entirely accurate.

Oral Questions

I would like to quote part of an article by Alain Dubuc from *La Presse*. He said:

If there are no jobs available in a region, nothing changes. If there are jobs, the unemployed worker may be required to accept a position. But the end result would be a bigger paycheque than the EI cheque, and therefore a higher annual income.

We want to help unemployed workers earn more money when they work.

* * *

[English]

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is International Development Week, a time when Canadians reflect on our values and ways we can help others around the world.

Let us flush out the values of the Conservatives. They use aid money on high-end hotels, limos and freshly squeezed orange juice. Meanwhile they have cut \$380 million in aid dollars. They have stopped partnerships with NGOs like Development and Peace and KAIROS. They have silenced CIDA staff. They have dropped aid for the poorest countries in Africa.

When will the government take our international obligations to developing countries seriously?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Canadian public can take great solace and be very proud of the hard-earned dollars that are achieving great results. Canada's investments are providing food, health and emergency humanitarian assistance to those who need it the most.

We will continue to ensure Canadian tax dollars are spent in ways that achieve the best possible results. Canadians deserve no less and we are doing exactly that.

* * *

• (1455)

**HUMAN RESOURCES AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
CANADA**

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development refuses to come to the HR committee and testify about the largest privacy breach in Canadian history.

Let me share a quote, "I am a minister. I am here to take personal responsibility. Ministerial responsibility is one of the essences of our Parliamentary democracy". That is a quote from her seatmate.

There are 600,000 Canadians who are concerned about this breach. Will the Minister of Foreign Affairs talk to his seatmate, have her come to committee and explain how this ever occurred and the measures she is taking?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I cannot say this often enough because it is so very true. The loss of information in the department was totally and completely unacceptable, mainly because it was avoidable.

The government does support calling departmental officials to explain how this happened and what steps they have taken and will be taking to ensure that nothing like this happens again.

* * *

CREDIT CARD INDUSTRY

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Conservatives continue to ignore skyrocketing credit card merchant fees that hurt the bottom line of small businesses in our communities. Canadian merchants already pay among the highest merchant fees in the world that tally up to a whopping \$5 billion a year. With these fees set to increase again April 1, the minister continues to promote a voluntary code that was supposed stop these types of fees.

Will the Conservatives continue to defend a toothless code of conduct that is not working, or will they finally step in and put a stop to this excessive cash grab?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to reiterate, not just for my colleague, but for everyone in the House exactly what the Federation of Independent Business said about that code and about what we have done as a government. It said:

—the Code...has served merchants extremely well...[it] has done an excellent job in ensuring some fair ground rules and maintaining Canada's low-cost debit system

I follow that up with another quote:

—the Code played a big role in saving low-cost debit in Canada and it gave merchants some degree of power in dealing with the payments industry.

We continue to support our low tax plan and our job creation plan. Unfortunately, those members do not support that.

[Translation]

Mr. François Lapointe (Montmagny—L'Islet—Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we are not talking about debit cards; we are talking about excessive transaction fees for credit cards. It is not complicated.

The voluntary code of conduct simply does not work. And retailers across the country are paying the price.

In Quebec, grocers, retailers and hotel, convenience-store and service-station owners have all confirmed that the transaction fees for credit cards are excessive and constantly increasing.

They have all concluded that we need strict, effective regulations.

Why does the minister refuse to bring in rules to protect small businesses from having their small profit margins cut by the excessive fees imposed by credit card companies?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, consumers and industry groups—especially small businesses—welcomed the code.

Oral Questions

We are constantly monitoring to ensure that the rules are being followed. We have the power to make the code mandatory, but the NDP always votes against this kind of thing.

The Commissioner of Competition has asked the Competition Tribunal to examine some of the rules. We are encouraged to see that this issue is being examined.

* * *

[English]

THE ECONOMY

Mr. Blake Richards (Wild Rose, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while the NDP talks down Canada's economy, our Conservative government has a low tax plan for jobs and growth. Our plan has kept more money in the pockets of families and Canadian businesses to create jobs. While the NDP may not like it, lower taxes, and not costly new carbon taxes, help create jobs for Canadians and promote economic growth.

Would the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance please inform the House what Canada's manufacturers think of our low tax plan?

Mrs. Shelly Glover (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member for Wild Rose for his endless support of our low tax plan.

Before it calls again for more job-killing taxes, I ask the NDP to listen to what the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters has to say about our low tax plan, especially when it comes to job creation. It says:

Lower business tax rates have played an important role in supporting Canada's economic recovery, creating jobs and spurring investment....If federal tax rates had not been reduced, Canada's unemployment rate would have exceeded nine per cent... during the recession. Today, our unemployment rate would be higher than that of the United States...

We will not take any advice from the NDP on this one.

* * *

● (1500)

ETHICS

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this week the Conservatives were caught making deceptive robocalls in Saskatchewan, using the same company as Pierre Poutine. In Guelph, the phone numbers targeted came from the same Conservative database.

Interestingly, the manager of that CIMS database in Guelph, Chris Crawford, also reportedly rigged a Conservative nomination meeting in favour of the wife of Fred DeLorey, yes, the same Fred DeLorey who admitted he misled reporters about the calls in Saskatchewan.

Why has Mr. Crawford been given a huge, taxpayer-funded promotion to work for the ethically challenged minister from Labrador?

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know where to start with that latest Liberal laundry list of conspiracy theories.

Let me solve the most obvious conspiracy theory of all. Who do we know made illegal robocalls? The Liberal member for Guelph.

* * *

[Translation]

VETERANS

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the government tabled its report on depleted uranium. The report shocked former soldier Pascal Lacoste, who staged a hunger strike so that the government would recognize that he and his fellow veterans were poisoned by depleted uranium while on tour in Bosnia. Yesterday, he asked the minister if he would have the right to medical care.

But, as usual, the minister did not know what to say. Now that he has had time to think about it, can the minister tell us today if Pascal Lacoste and his fellow veterans will have the right to medical care?

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would ask that the member put aside his political opinions when talking about the health and safety of our soldiers and veterans.

[English]

In 2010 our government called upon an independent scientific body to be struck. That body has committed more than 1,500 volunteer hours and has just produced a report. I would like to thank Dr. Morisset for that report.

That report was posted on the Veterans Affairs website. I tabled it earlier today here in the House of Commons. The parliamentary committee can review that report.

This is not a matter for political interference. This is scientific evidence.

* * *

SPORT

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let the countdown begin. Today marks one year to go until the kickoff of the 2014 Sochi winter games, and my city of London will be well represented.

Our government is the single largest contributor to sport in the country, which provides opportunities for all Canadians to benefit from a healthy, active lifestyle.

With that said, let me ask the Minister of State for Sport if he could update the House on how, partly thanks to our investments, Canada is excelling in sport from the grassroots to the world stage.

Hon. Bal Gosal (Minister of State (Sport), CPC): Mr. Speaker, thanks to the leadership of our Prime Minister, I am confident our athletes will make Canadians proud at the Sochi 2014 winter games.

In 2013, Canadians have much to celebrate already. Last Friday the Minister of Industry and I were happy to light the 2013 Canada Summer Games torch before it makes its way to Sherbrooke, Quebec. I am proud to say our Special Olympians set a new record, winning 44 gold, 44 silver and 21 bronze medals at the World Winter Games. Those are the results of which we are proud.

* * *

[Translation]

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while the Conservatives are doing nothing to protect Canadian consumers, another large corporation has decided to start charging additional fees for paper billing. Now you have to pay in order to pay. Rogers just informed its customers that they will be charged \$2 for every paper bill if they do not switch to online billing. Contrary to what the government says, the broadband program will in no way change anything for low-income individuals or for seniors.

When will this government really protect consumers?

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of Industry and Minister of State (Agriculture), CPC): Mr. Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth.

Since coming to office, we have taken action to protect consumers. Contrary to my colleague's claims that accessing the Internet is not important, it is. It is very important; it is today's new technology. I invite the NDP to join the 21st century.

When we adopted the broadband program, the NDP opposed it. This proves that the NDP is completely out of touch with reality.

* * *

• (1505)

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, today I spoke to the mayor of the Magdalen Islands.

The people of the Magdalen Islands and eastern Quebec are worried about the serious environmental impact of developing the Old Harry prospect.

Furthermore, a spill could wipe out the regional economy of the islands in one fell swoop. The report of the Commissioner of the Environment, which confirms that there are gaps in the risk assessments and that no one is prepared to respond to an oil spill, backs them up completely.

Will the government stop shirking its responsibilities and impose a moratorium on the development of Old Harry?

[English]

Mr. David Anderson (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Natural Resources and for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I received the report from the Commissioner of the Environment the other day. When he spoke about our working with other departments and jurisdictions, he said:

Business of the House

For me, it's been a model of cooperation with senior government officials, both in terms of working through difficult files and in terms of the government accepting our recommendations.

We continue to work with the governments of other jurisdictions, and we will continue to work on that.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, during question period, the Prime Minister made a suggestion that I had—publicly, I guess, because he had some evidence—suggested that we should pull out of the present EU trade talks. I would offer him the opportunity to table such documentation here in the House.

I know it has been a hard day for the Prime Minister because of what has happened in the Senate, but there is no reason to make up things and then throw them across the way without evidence.

Right Hon. Stephen Harper (Prime Minister, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if I could clarify, in fairness to the hon. member, I think I was citing the NDP critic for foreign affairs for Canadian-American relations and not the general critic.

In fact, he was the one who actually said he was opposed to the Canada-Jordan free trade agreement.

The Speaker: Order. Question period is over. There was a request for a document to be tabled. I did not see a document to be tabled. This is not a forum to continue on debate; that is what question periods are for.

If the hon. member has a legitimate point of order, I urge him to get to it quickly and not just continue in discussion of the facts.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the Prime Minister for his correction, but I do want to assure him and tell him that it was my advice to the former leader and the present leader to support the Jordan free trade agreement and—

The Speaker: I encourage the hon. member to take that up at a future question period.

The hon. member for Saint-Lambert has the Thursday question.

* * *

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to ask the hon. Leader of the Government in the House of Commons what bills his government plans to bring forward for debate the rest of this week and next.

Last week, the hon. member for Skeena—Bulkley Valley spoke about this government's lack of vision and direction.

Speaker's Ruling

For example, it has not tabled new legislation or announced new programs to address the needs of first nations or to help Canadian families cope with devastating changes to employment insurance. Instead, it has left that to the official opposition, which has used opposition motions to propose practical solutions. We are happy to keep fighting for those who have been abandoned by the Conservatives. We believe that Canadians deserve far better.

We had an important debate about Mali on Tuesday evening, but once again the government left it to the opposition to fill the void during debate on this critical issue. We were disappointed to see that no ministers showed enough interest to rise in the House to speak about the current situation in Mali.

[English]

Can the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons tell me what plans he has for the remainder of this week as well as next? Does he have a plan at all?

• (1510)

[Translation]

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Yes, I have a plan, Mr. Speaker.

This afternoon, we will continue today's NDP opposition day.

Tomorrow, we should finish the second reading debate on Bill C-52, Fair Rail Freight Service Act. Then, we will resume the second reading debate on Bill C-48, Technical Tax Amendments Act, 2012.

Before question period on Monday and Tuesday, the House will debate third reading of Bill C-42, Enhancing Royal Canadian Mounted Police Accountability Act. After question period those days, we will turn to second reading of Bill C-51, Safer Witnesses Act.

[English]

On Wednesday, we will debate second reading of Bill S-12, the incorporation by reference in regulations act. I do not expect that this bill, which responds to views of the Standing Joint Committee for the Scrutiny of Regulations, would need a lot of House time. I hope we can deal with it quickly. We could then turn to report stage and possible third reading of Bill S-7, the combating terrorism act.

Next Thursday shall be the fourth allotted day, which I understand will see the Liberals choosing our topic of debate.

On Friday, we will resume any unfinished debates on the bills we just mentioned, or we could also consider dealing with any of the many bills dealing with aboriginal issues. That being raised as a concern, we have Bill S-2 dealing with matrimonial property; we have another bill dealing with safe water for first nations; and we have another bill dealing with fair elections for first nations. On all of these bills we would welcome the support of the official opposition. We have not had that to date, but if we do, we can deal with them very quickly on that day. I would be delighted to do that. I will await with interest the response from the NDP.

[Translation]

PRIVILEGE

ACCESS TO INFORMATION—SPEAKER'S RULING

The Speaker: I am now prepared to rule on the question of privilege raised on January 31, 2013, by the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier regarding the procedures of the Department of Public Works and Government Services Canada with respect to providing information to members of Parliament.

[English]

I would like to thank the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier for having raised this matter, as well as the hon. Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, the hon. opposition House leader and the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House for their comments.

[Translation]

The hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier charged that government procedures requiring elected officials to seek public information through the minister's office, while ordinary citizens could obtain the very same information directly from the department, impeded him from carrying out his duties as a member, particularly as this information was required for him to prepare to ask questions during question period. He worried that it was the government's intention to make it difficult if not impossible for him to serve his constituents.

[English]

The member further stated that he believed this disparity in procedures was being applied in such a manner so as to create an inequality of access to information between government members and opposition members.

The parliamentary secretary expressed the view that constituency-related duties of a member are not covered by parliamentary privilege and suggested that there are other ways for the member to obtain the information that he is seeking, namely through written and oral questions.

[Translation]

Given that a member's access to accurate and timely information is an essential cornerstone of our parliamentary system, it is perhaps not surprising that, in the past, other members have raised very similar concerns about access to departmental information.

Simply put, the question of privilege raised by the hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier raises the question of whether an alleged interference with a member's ability to access departmental information in a timely and equitable manner constitutes a *prima facie* breach of privilege.

When the hon. member first raised this matter, he spoke of the need to have a, "level playing field of access to information for the benefit of the constituents we have been elected to represent".

[English]

A careful review of various precedents on the issue of whether parliamentary privilege covers a member's constituency responsibilities reveals that Speakers have been quite categorical in stating that parliamentary privilege applies only in instances where members were participating in what is deemed to be a parliamentary proceeding. On October 9, 1997, at page 689 of *Debates*, Speaker Parent explained:

The Chair is mindful of the multiple responsibilities, duties and constituency related activities of all members and of the importance they play in the work of every member of Parliament. However, my role as your Speaker is to consider only those matters that affect the parliamentary work of members.

• (1515)

[Translation]

In the same ruling, Speaker Parent added, at page 688 of *Debates* that:

in order for a member to claim that his privileges have been breached or that a contempt has occurred, he or she must have been functioning as a member at the time of the alleged offence, that is, actually participating in a proceeding of Parliament. The activities of members in their constituencies do not appear to fall within the definition of a "proceeding in Parliament".

[English]

In a ruling on a similar matter on February 4, 2008, which can be found at page 2540 of the *Debates*, Speaker Milliken came to the same conclusion. Other Speakers have likewise had occasion to clearly define what constitutes parliamentary work or a proceeding in Parliament.

[Translation]

The hon. member for Ottawa—Vanier did in fact attempt to make that very link to the proceedings in Parliament when he said that he needed the information in question as part of his work in preparing to ask a question during question period. It is the view of the Chair that this falls short of established definitions of parliamentary work. Again, Speaker Parent's October 9, 1997, ruling is very instructive in this regard. He stated at page 688 of the *Debates* that:

After careful consideration of the precedents, I conclude that activities related to the seeking of information in order to prepare a question do not fall within the strict definition of what constitutes a "proceeding in Parliament" and, therefore, they are not protected by privilege.

[English]

For his part, the opposition House leader reminded the House of Speaker Bosley's ruling on May 15, 1985, at page 4769 of *Debates*, in which he declared:

I think it has been recognized many times in the House that a complaint about the actions or inactions of government Departments cannot constitute a question of parliamentary privilege.

[Translation]

This is not to say that the hon. member does not have a legitimate grievance or that the departmental response and process that he encountered does not warrant review, if only for its apparent inefficiency. The member may wish to approach the minister to see if a satisfactory accommodation is possible. In addition, as Speaker Milliken once suggested in a similar case, the member could also seek to have the appropriate standing committee inquire about the

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departmental procedures in place to assist members of Parliament in seeking information with a view to making recommendations for improvement.

[English]

However, as Speaker, I am obliged to assess situations of this kind within the strict parameters that flow from our precedents and usages as they relate to parliamentary privilege. It is beyond the purview of the Chair to intervene in departmental matters or to get involved in government processes, no matter how frustrating they may appear to be to the member.

[Translation]

Accordingly, in keeping with the precedents cited, the Chair cannot conclude that the member for Ottawa—Vanier has been impeded in the performance of his parliamentary duties and thus I cannot find that a prima facie breach of privilege has occurred.

I thank all members for their attention on this matter.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—PARLIAMENTARY BUDGET OFFICER

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: The Hon. member from Louis-Hébert has five minutes left for questions and comments.

[English]

Resuming debate, the hon. member for York Centre.

Mr. Mark Adler (York Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo.

I welcome this opportunity to address today's NDP opposition motion. Even though the NDP claims that today's motion is about the Parliamentary Budget Officer, the party has been using it to attack and talk down the Canadian economy as they always do, such as calling our resource sector a disease, sending a delegation down to Washington, D.C., to argue against the creation of Canadian jobs and its determination to impose a \$21.5 billion carbon tax.

It is essential that my friends across the way and all Canadians understand just how important Canada's economic and fiscal health is to our Conservative government. Since day one, the economy has been priority one for this government. This government focuses on what matters most to Canadians: jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. We have the strong record to prove it. It is a record that Canadians trust and that has garnered international recognition. As Tom Donohue, president of the American Chamber of Commerce said recently, "The great Canadian miracle is something we should follow".

Business of Supply

However, at the same time that we are proud of our economic accomplishments, we understand that we cannot become complacent. With an uncertain global economy, especially in Europe and the United States, we must remain focused on creating jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. What does this mean? It means making sure that Canada offers the right environment to attract business investment, making sure that we continue to innovate and making sure that Canadians have the skills they need to get high-quality jobs.

As I mentioned earlier, it is important to remember that Canada is positioned relatively better than many of its G7 peers. Contrary to what the official opposition may believe, our economic policies, such as Canada's economic action plan, have placed Canada on the right track for jobs and growth.

Let us take a minute to consider this. We all remember the show *Dragnet* where Sergeant Friday would say, "Just the facts, ma'am". Let me give members the facts. Canada has more than recovered all of the jobs lost during the recession. Since July 2009 we have created 925,000 net new jobs in this country, the strongest job growth record in the G7. In short, Canada has weathered the economic storm well and others are noticing. Do not take my word for it. Let us hear what others are saying.

Just last week the *Chicago Tribune* praised Canada's economic policies saying:

The key to Canada's success has been avoiding some of the worst mistakes made by its neighbor to the south.

Americans failed to regulate their banks. Canada's banks are stable.

Americans overinflated their real estate market. Canada's housing market never went pop.

While it is gratifying to highlight Canada's economic strengths, as I said, we cannot afford to be complacent. Today's advantage will not carry into tomorrow simply by luck or good intentions. Do members know what will not maintain this advantage? Increasing taxes on Canadians and job creators, particularly by introducing a \$21 billion carbon tax, or the introduction of other risky schemes such as imposing a transaction tax on our world-class banks. When will the NDP get it right? Higher taxes and bigger government do not create jobs. This is especially true in today's global economy.

As we have always said, Canada's economy is not immune to forces beyond our borders. A number of external threats could have severe consequences on the Canadian economy. Yet rest assured, our government is aware of these global challenges and that is why our government has taken action to protect Canadians and the Canadian economy.

• (1520)

That brings me to another issue I would like to highlight today, how our government's record of responsible fiscal management has made Canada's economy more resilient and our finances more sustainable. In an era when we see governments crippled by decades of living beyond their means, or when we have governments without any viable realistic plans to ensure long-term fiscal sustainability, our government has followed a different path. Indeed, between the time we formed government in 2006 and the global economic recession, we aggressively paid off \$38 billion in federal debt. In fact, we have the lowest federal debt to GDP ratio in almost 30 years.

This gave Canada more flexibility to react to the global economic recession. We were able to take the necessary action to stimulate the Canadian economy and to protect Canadian jobs. Even after taking this action, we were able to maintain the lowest debt to GDP ratio in the G7. Now that is good fiscal management.

Unlike many European countries as well as our neighbours to the south, our government has a plan to return to balanced budgets and ensure our long-term fiscal sustainability.

However it does not end there. We have also taken other concrete actions to make government spending more efficient and sustainable. For example, we took steps to ensure that public sector pension plans are brought in line with those of the private sector. We also took action to ensure that Canada's social programs remain sustainable over the long term, so that they are still there for the next generation. We have also eliminated tax loopholes, to ensure that everyone pays a fair share.

Rest assured that our government's commitment to ensuring the most efficient use of taxpayers' dollars is constant and it will always be core to our agenda. Indeed, government program spending is projected to steadily decline over the next few years and fall well below pre-recession levels.

Direct program spending will decline from \$120 billion to \$118 billion next year. It will remain below \$120 billion for the next four years. Overall, program spending will continue to fall as a percentage of GDP from 13.8% this year to 12.5% in 2017-18. While our government is committed to balancing the budget, unlike the previous Liberal government, we have not and will not reduce transfers to Canadians such as seniors and children or transfers to other levels of government for services that Canadian families rely on, such as health care and social services.

Canadians trying to balance their household budget know the importance of living within their means and the dangers of not doing so. They expect the government to know the same. That is precisely what our government is doing and the Parliamentary Budget Officer agrees. In his recent report, the PBO said, "PBO and Finance Canada both assess the federal fiscal structure to be sustainable over the long term". In addition to that, the PBO said: "The take-away from this is, federally, we are in a good spot right now".

Canadians understand the consequences of unsustainable finances. International observers understand it. The PBO understands it. Why does the NDP not understand it? Why does the NDP want higher taxes for Canadians and job creators? Why does it want bloated government? Why does it want to waste hard-earned tax dollars of Canadians on interest costs?

Business of Supply

If New Democrats really want to badmouth the Canadian economy, then they should be upfront with Canadians and tell them they want a debate on the implementation of a carbon tax or bank transaction tax, or any hare-brained, risky socialist scheme they can come up with. Certainly they have a bunch of them in their bag of tricks.

Despite the NDP's misguided direction, one thing is clear. Since 2006, our government has continually taken the long view in managing our economy, and that will not change. Our priority is jobs, growth and long-term prosperity.

• (1525)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskasing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, most of the speech had really nothing with the PBO. It was basically trying to push his government's record. It is a record of inaction for the most part. We look at the fact that the PBO's position is really to look at what the government is putting forward and get the necessary information to make sure the numbers actually are what the government says. However, we see a government that keeps making sure the documentation is not provided.

We would not have known about the F-35 fiasco had it not been for the PBO, and that is exactly what he is there for, for accountability. However, the government keeps going back in time when it comes to accountability.

The evidence speaks for itself. How can the government member disagree with making the PBO an independent officer of Parliament, given that it was Mr. Page who alerted Canadians to an impending deficit, despite contrary and misleading claims by the government?

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, I would like to remind the hon. member that it was this government that set up the Parliamentary Budget Office in the first place.

The member talks about facts. Perhaps she was not listening the first time so I will repeat it a second time. The fact of the matter is that, in the Parliamentary Budget Officer's recent report, the Parliamentary Budget Officer stated that, "PBO and Finance Canada both assess the federal fiscal structure to be sustainable over the long term." He went on to state, "The take-away from this is, federally, we're in a good spot right now."

This government remains focused on jobs, growth and long-term prosperity, not risky, socialist schemes like imposing a \$21.5 billion carbon tax and calling for more bloated government.

• (1530)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question to the member is fairly straightforward, regarding the importance and the valuable work that the Parliamentary Budget Officer does for the House of Commons and, through that, to all Canadians.

We do recognize that, come mid-March, Kevin Page will be leaving his post, unless of course he is given the extension. There is a valid argument to be made that an extension is warranted.

I want to know why it is the government members would not see the merit of having Mr. Page stay on for a couple of additional months just to ensure there is a proper transition with whomever

takes on that responsibility going forward. The benefits of having Mr. Page there would be enormous.

Why would the government not at least acknowledge that it would definitely be advantageous to have him stick around longer than his contract, which will be expiring in March?

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, there is a process underway right now, which was set up when the Parliamentary Budget Office was established. There is a process underway, and we will have a new Parliamentary Budget Officer in place in due course.

Ms. Lois Brown (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the hon. member could comment on what government it was that brought this office into being and what was the position of the opposition at the time it was voted on?

Mr. Mark Adler: Mr. Speaker, we all remember that the Liberal governments from 1993 to 2005 had economic estimates that would never jibe with reality—bloated spending, bloated government and higher taxes. The Liberals never saw a tax they did not like.

Our government brought in the Parliamentary Budget Officer and office to have an independent assessment of the government books, government spending and government fiscal management.

I thank the member for her question because it gives me an opportunity once again to quote the Parliamentary Budget Officer as he praises our government. I quote him once again because the NDP did not hear it the first or second time.

In his report, the Parliamentary Budget Officer said, "PBO and Finance Canada both assess the federal fiscal structure to be sustainable over the long term." In addition to that, the Parliamentary Budget Officer stated "The take-away from this is, federally, we're in a good spot right now."

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, CPC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to lend my voice to the debate today on the NDP motion presented by my colleague on the finance committee.

While I may not agree with her and the NDP's economic agenda of higher taxes, carbon taxes and more deficit spending, I also recognize that the majority of Canadians do not either, so I think we can take some degree of comfort in that.

Right from the start I will note, as many of my Conservative colleagues have done already, that we have no intention to move the Parliamentary Budget Officer outside the Library of Parliament. We want to see a Parliamentary Budget Officer who is a non-partisan, credible source of opinion on fiscal matters, and allowing the Library of Parliament to do that is the best course of action.

During my time, I would like to focus on our Conservative government's landmark achievements in enhancing budget and fiscal transparency since forming government in 2006. This issue has certainly received a lot of media attention of late, especially in the context of today's debate. Therefore, I am happy to provide some insight to parliamentarians and all Canadians.

Business of Supply

I am really proud to say that our Conservative government has already established a solid record of keeping Canadians very well informed about government expenditures. This includes creating the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Preparing the federal budget essentially means drawing a blueprint for how the government intends to set the annual economic agenda for Canada and how we will allocate taxpayers' money. It sets out our country's economic priorities and the means by which these goals will be achieved.

Because the budget is ultimately funded by Canadian taxpayers, we not only believe Canadians have every right to know exactly how and where their tax dollars are being spent; we also believe that all Canadians should participate in the process. I would like to highlight a few specifics of the budget-making process and talk about the consultations phase, a process that really engages Canadians directly.

The way we prepare the budget has changed dramatically since the first budget was presented on December 7, 1867, but the basic principles behind it have changed little.

Traditionally, the budget process was done in the backrooms of Ottawa, with little consultation with everyday Canadians. Today, things are very different. This year, as in previous years, our government undertook a series of extensive public consultations, as did the finance committee.

Additionally, when it comes to economic projections, no longer do we rely on projections made in secret with little transparency of where or how they were determined. That has changed so much. For instance, in 2012, the Minister of Finance consulted with private sector economists in March and October on their forecasts, before presenting the budget and fall update.

Indeed, this has been a long-standing practice, where the government surveys more than a dozen of the most prominent private sector forecasters—Canada's leading independent and impartial economists from Canada's leading banks and academic institutions—to obtain their projections of economic growth and other key variables such as interest rates, the unemployment rate and the inflation rate.

I should also note that all these details and all the details on the government's spending are, for the first time ever, often available free of charge and displayed openly and transparently on websites of the Department of Finance and the Treasury Board Secretariat.

I would encourage all hon. members to explore those websites, because the information on those websites is absolutely phenomenal. On the finance website, the publications and reports contain detailed information that is very illuminating. I encourage everyone to explore those websites because they are quite phenomenal in terms of the information that is there, which can really guide us as we move forward in our decision-making.

The economic forecast that is used as the basis for fiscal planning in the annual budget and update of economic and fiscal projections is the average of that survey of private-sector forecasters. This gives the government an impartial, outside view of the economy and introduces an element of independence into the government's fiscal

forecasting process. This is supported and applauded by such organizations as the International Monetary Fund.

This is an approach that has made a significant contribution to the strength and resiliency of the Canadian economy, a record that most others envy.

• (1535)

I would like to remind the NDP, which is so fond of talking Canada's economy down, that we have created over 900,000 net new jobs since July 2009, 90% of them are full time and 75% of them are in the private sector. This is the best job growth record in the entire G7, which is something that even the NDP cannot deny. In fact, what people will not hear from the NDP is that many around the world are looking to Canada's economic leadership as a model to follow.

I would like to share a quote from Tom Donohue, the president of the U. S. Chamber of Commerce. Recently he said this about our economic achievements, "The great Canadian miracle is something we should follow".

Returning to the budget process, I want to underline the importance of public consultations with everyday Canadians in creating this document, which is something I am sure all finance committee members can relate to. Indeed, at finance committee, we met with hundreds of groups and individuals from across Canada. We heard from over 600 individuals, business groups and organizations.

Additionally, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, along with other ministers and MPs fan out across the country to directly consult with citizens on their budget priorities and how best to meet them. In my riding I am, and I am sure MPs from across the country are, taking that time to sit down with business owners and individuals. It is absolutely amazing to hear the very important suggestions and excellent insight that we get from Canadians from coast to coast to coast, and that actually forms the foundation of our budget.

Every year, I am so delighted to see some of those observations made by Canadians. When we look at it in the budget process, we have seen it come from a simple idea, or not so simple idea at times, into the format that will move Canada forward.

We really support and encourage consultation from coast to coast. This year, for the first time, we tried online prebudget consultations as another format. In fact, since 2006, our Conservative government was the first government in history to open doors to online prebudget consultations to all, again, ensuring that people who wanted their voices heard would have the opportunity.

In fact, even though it is getting a bit late, there is still an opportunity to have some input. Just go to the Department of Finance website, www.fin.gc.ca. The current online consultation that started on November 30 asks Canadians for their ideas on cost neutral or low cost measures to further solidify our economic recovery.

The budget planning process in recent years has opened up even further to encourage all governments to work together and consult with interested groups. That is transparency. That is engagement.

Business of Supply

These consultations are critical to ensuring that, at the end of the day, the budget reflects the priorities of Canadians and that government maintains the focus on job creation, economic growth and long-term prosperity.

As our government has done since 2006, this budget will reflect our country's key priorities for creating a strong economy that will benefit all Canadians. Specifically, economic action plan 2013 will continue to build on the strengths and the key pro-growth initiatives our government has been working on in the past year.

We will remain focused on what matters to most Canadians, jobs and economic growth, and ensure that Canada's economic advantage today will translate into the long-term prosperity of tomorrow.

Canadians should expect nothing less from Canada's budget and their government.

• (1540)

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapuskaing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, again, the government talks about accountability. Yes, it did create the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer. Yes, it did put an accountability bill forward and legislation. However, that is all it has done. It can talk about it, but when it comes time to act, when it comes time to do the right thing, it does not.

[Translation]

Once again, why do they always put up roadblocks every time the Parliamentary Budget Officer asks for information?

[English]

The other question I have is on the position of the Parliamentary Budget Officer being up for review, which is yet to be done. How can the government say that it is accountable when it does not even follow what it should be doing?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Mr. Speaker, we are very proud that we created this position, which is a resource for all parliamentarians. We are certainly moving forward in looking at the replacement process with the Parliamentary Budget Officer. However, transparency and accountability is more than just one position. I would again refer all hon. members to look at the enormous resources and amount of information that is very transparent for the first time ever in terms of what our government does with budget consultations and with the prebudget process.

Again, I am very proud of our record, and our record is seeing results. Just look at how we have seen our way through a great recession and how Canada remains the envy of the world.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this is a question that I have posed to the member's colleagues and would now like to ask her.

Mr. Page's term is coming to an end in mid-March. The Library of Parliament is in the process of replacing him, but all we are hearing is that it will be "sometime". Even government members are indicating "sometime soon".

We have constantly suggested to the government that there is great value for all Canadians if in fact we recognize Mr. Page for the contributions he has made to date. Also, with the upcoming budget,

we are proposing to spend billions and billions of tax dollars. Does the member not see the value in allowing Mr. Page to continue on for a short term to allow for more accountability and transparency within those budgetary numbers, which would benefit all parliamentarians and in fact all Canadians?

• (1545)

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Mr. Speaker, as we are aware, the term of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is coming to an end. The Library of Parliament is undergoing a very active process in engaging the next parliamentary budget officer. We recognize that there is certainly more than one man. However, at the finance committee we have heard excellent input from the whole department and he often comes with many capable individuals to the table in terms of the analysis they do.

Again, I would like to reiterate that there are many areas that are available for all parliamentarians to get the information they need. Certainly, we all look forward to the budget that will be presented sometime this spring.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue, for her work in this area.

I appreciate the review of the budget process, but people need to understand that the budget is a policy document. In actual fact, to look at the budgets that we have produced, and not just our government but all governments, there are a lot of numbers in there. It is the policy of what we will do from a financial perspective as a government. Out of that comes implementation bills, which put money to those projects.

Does the member feel that it is the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to comment on the policy aspects and policy direction of the current government, or any government, now or in the future?

Mrs. Cathy McLeod: Mr. Speaker, that is an excellent question from my colleague. We have looked at the analysis done by the PBO and, as he indicated, the budget that will be presented is a very vast document. If we look at the presentations from the 600 individuals who came forward, they were not about numbers but how we as a country could move forward. An example is how we might look toward improving some programs with our first nations communities and economic opportunities.

It is important to recognize that where we go with the budget is really about growth and long-term prosperity for Canadians and it is truly a policy document.

[Translation]

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat (Pontiac, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to inform you that I will be sharing my time.

The Federal Accountability Act specifically states that the Parliamentary Budget Officer, or the PBO, shall provide the Senate and the House of Commons with independent analysis on the state of the nation's finances, the government's estimates and trends in the Canadian economy.

Business of Supply

The Act also provides that the Parliamentary Budget Officer shall undertake research into the nation's finances and economy and the government's estimates, that is expenditures in general, and that he must provide estimates of the financial cost of any proposal that relates to a matter over which Parliament has jurisdiction.

In his first term, the Parliamentary Budget Officer and his team produced at least 150 key reports, some on a regular basis and some at the request of parliamentarians. I requested reports when I sat on a committee.

A good number of these reports shed light on important financial details that were not found in government publications, which are often too partisan. I must say that, on other occasions, these reports confirmed the key findings of certain government publications.

I found a few key reports that were particularly useful. One of these reports deals with the estimated financial impact of the F-35 procurement program. Imagine what we would not have known had the Parliamentary Budget Officer not spoken out about this program.

A report on the financial impact of the mission in Afghanistan was key in informing Canadians of the cost of a military intervention in a foreign country.

A report on old age security clearly affects members of the aging population who need services in my riding and in all of our ridings.

What is more, a report on the financial impact of the Safe Streets and Communities Act addresses the issue of the safety of Canadians, our children and our families.

Finally, the Parliamentary Budget Officer also released a report on the funding needs of schools on first nations reserves. Hon. members may already be aware that there are two first nations communities in my riding, the Barriere Lake reserve, which is also known as Rapid Lake, and the Kitigan Zibi reserve. This report is therefore essential to the lives of people in these communities, their schools and their education.

The truth is that the Parliamentary Budget Officer did his job very well but he never received any recognition from the government, which never hesitated to attack him.

● (1550)

[English]

For example, let us consider this quote:

The Conservatives said on Thursday they are not budging from their earlier estimates. They have not made full forecasts, but Mr. Page's office said figures released by the government have suggested the total cost of the planes would be \$17.6 billion.

Department of National Defence procurement experts stand by their cost projections...

That quote was from the *Globe and Mail* on March 11, 2011, and we know how that went.

There is also another quote, which states:

We also have significant concerns about the completeness of cost information provided to parliamentarians. In March 2011, National Defence responded publicly to the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report. This response did not include estimated operating, personnel, or ongoing training costs.

Let us consider what the President of the Treasury Board said:

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

In this case, the Minister of Finance talked about the Parliamentary Budget Officer and his figures and said, "unbelievable, unreliable and incredible".

However, we know that the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report was sounder with regard to certain figures and facts. I continue, again:

I don't agree entirely with some of the assumptions.

On his part, the Prime Minister said:

The government of Canada today is in surplus. The government of Canada today is not planning a deficit...

Consider the following from page 202 of budget 2009:

...the Government is projecting a small surplus in 2008-09, followed by deficits of \$15.7 billion in 2009-10, \$14.3 billion in 2010-11, \$8.3 billion in 2011-12, \$2.3 billion in 2012-13 and a surplus of \$5.5 billion in 2013-14.

The actual numbers, which were confirmed by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, were \$5.8 billion in 2008-09, \$55.6 billion in 2009-10, \$33.4 billion in 2010-11, and \$26.2 billion in 2011-12.

Yet on that side of the aisle, there seems to be some form of collective denial with regard to the accuracy of the facts and figures of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

The importance that the government gives to the role of Parliamentary Budget Officer can also be seen when we compare his office to others across the world. For example, the PBO has only 12 full-time staff and 2 interns, while the Congressional Budget Office has over 200 staff. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has a budget of only \$2.8 million, while the Congressional Budget Office in the United States has a budget of \$46.8 million.

In its short existence, the PBO has been able to publish, as indicated before, over 150 analytical reports. It is clear that the Parliamentary Budget Officer is doing a lot with very little. I would also like to point out the fact that the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, South Korea, the Netherlands, Sweden and many other nations have, or planned, well-funded and well-staffed budget research offices to serve their national legislatures. That is unlike the Government of Canada, which claims it is undying in its support of accountability.

● (1555)

[Translation]

We in the NDP want to make clear and practical changes that will increase transparency in this country. That is why, for example, the NDP wants to strengthen the already outstanding work done by the Parliamentary Budget Officer in all respects. We want to ensure that there are no interruptions in the day-to-day operations of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. With that in mind, we want Kevin Page's mandate to be extended until his replacement can be found.

Business of Supply

The Conservative attacks on the Parliamentary Budget Officer and his team clearly showed the need to ensure that the office is independent. The NDP wants to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full, independent officer of Parliament. The NDP also wants the selection process for the new Parliamentary Budget Officer to be open and transparent, because many Canadians fear that the government will not fill the position or will appoint someone who is incapable of doing the job or does not want to do it.

We want to expand the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. We are of the opinion that the Parliamentary Budget Officer's mandate must be broadened to ensure that the office can report on all aspects of the economy and public finances without being subject to political attacks. These are practical solutions that will make our country and our public accounts more transparent.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to emphasize the fine work that the Parliamentary Budget Officer does for all Canadians, especially if one looks at his overall budget. I think most people would be quite surprised how much value the Parliamentary Budget Officer provides the House for only a few million dollars. In terms of accountability and compared to the amount of money it costs to have one member of Parliament, it is quite significant. There is great value in the Parliamentary Budget Officer. There are arguments to be made that we should be looking at how much the office is actually financed with.

I applaud the motion. It is very specific. It really wants us to get that extension and wants the parliamentary budget office to be more independent.

When the member thinks of an independent Parliamentary Budget Officer is he referring to one that would be not only direct to the House of Commons but also hired through an all party committee of sorts, much like some jurisdictions do for independent officers? How would he see a Parliamentary Budget Officer being hired?

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: Mr. Speaker, essentially what we want to do is to ensure that this particular officer has more independence and a greater budget. Imagine what he or she could do with a budget and staff twice or three times the current size and a government behind that office that truly believes in transparency and accountability. There is no reason why this officer could not function in the same way as the Auditor General, or some other officers, do.

• (1600)

[Translation]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the riding of the hon. member for Pontiac is very similar to mine in terms of size, population and economy.

Earlier, I heard the parliamentary secretary talking about all sorts of resources available on the Internet. Since I know my colleague's riding well, I would like to ask him how many people in Ladysmith, Chapeau, Lytton, Otter Lake and so on have high-speed Internet and how much it costs for those who do have it?

In my riding, I constantly meet people who tell me that Internet access is extremely expensive and does not work. It takes three hours to download a two-page PDF document.

Should the government not be ensuring that people have Internet access before closing offices and putting all of the information online? That will be of absolutely no help to some people.

I would also like to ask my colleague another question. Is there a business in his riding that could continue to function knowing that the accountant will retire in a month, but not knowing if he will be able to stay on while they find another one?

Mr. Mathieu Ravignat: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question. He knows my riding well and I know that he spends time in my community.

Internet access is still a problem in some areas of my riding. We are encouraging companies to set up shop and provide high-speed Internet access. It is increasingly becoming an essential tool for small businesses, but it is also needed just to have access to government services.

Naturally, if there is a seven-month opening in the Parliamentary Budget Officer position, just as the budget is being written, that could hinder Canadians' knowledge of the government's investments and use of public funds and so on. Obviously, that would be problematic.

[English]

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Pontiac for sharing his time with me. It was my great privilege to welcome him to our committee. He will do a fantastic job in deliberations on such matters as strengthening the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

I was honoured today to second this important motion tabled by my colleague, the member of Parliament for Parkdale—High Park, to reaffirm, strengthen and extend the critical mandate of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, or the PBO.

One of our primary obligations as parliamentarians is to scrutinize the government's spending plans as outlined in budgets, estimates and the reports on plans and priorities. This duty applies to all members of Parliament regardless of political affiliation, opposition and backbenchers alike.

Two successive studies by parliamentary committees have identified a significant failure by MPs in delivering this duty. A unanimous report that I had the privilege of contributing to, tabled last fall and entitled "Strengthening Parliamentary Scrutiny of Estimates and Supply", calls on the government to take action to improve the capacity of MPs to enable more meaningful scrutiny of estimates and supply. This report recognized the important role played by the Parliamentary Budget Officer in this process. The report noted an OECD finding that best practices for budget transparency require that "Parliament should have the opportunity and resources to effectively examine any fiscal report that it deems necessary".

The committee heard testimony from an array of Canadian and international experts, who concurred that the PBO is a key player in improving and supplementing the capacity of MPs.

Business of Supply

Dr. Joachim Wehner, associate professor of public policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science, testified that in order to improve scrutiny of the estimates and supply, “The first [requirement]...is to protect and enhance the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.... Internationally, the Parliamentary Budget Officer of Canada is very highly regarded, and it's certainly a major change...in the degree the parliament in Canada has access to an independent, highly professional research capacity”. He added that the role of the PBO could be further strengthened if made a full officer of Parliament with total access to all relevant information. Dr. Wehner shared that his views were premised on international experience with such officers in other jurisdictions.

What is the PBO and where does his mandate arise? The PBO was created in 2006 with the enactment of the Financial Accountability Act. His mandate is clearly prescribed in law to “provide independent analysis to the Senate and to the House of Commons about the state of the nation’s finances, the estimates of the government and trends in the national economy”. He is also mandated to undertake research and assist committees in the review and analysis of estimates. Clearly, the PBO must have ready and open access to financial and economic data to deliver on these duties. MPs and committees have found this information and advice indispensable to their scrutiny of government spending and estimates. Accessibility to all information has regrettably been a matter of ongoing contention for the current PBO. He was ultimately forced to seek a court ruling due to access denials.

While the official opposition was pleased that the government operations and estimates committee report recognized the valuable role of the PBO, in a supplementary report the New Democrats also called on the government to take immediate action to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer an officer of Parliament. Valuing his role, we also recommended that the PBO be legally mandated to report not just to the finance committee, but also to the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates with respect to its estimates work.

This call is reflected in proposed legislation tabled by my colleague the MP for Parkdale—High Park. Our call is endorsed by Canadian expert Dr. David Good, professor at the School of Public Administration at the University of Victoria, who testified: “First, I would make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full agent of Parliament to assist parliamentarians and committees. I think the role and mandate of the Parliamentary Budget Officer needs to be clarified and strengthened by making the office legislatively separate and independent of the Library of Parliament, thereby operating as a full agent of Parliament”.

• (1605)

The important work of the PBO is highly regarded in Canada and abroad. In fact, next week the Parliamentary Budget Officer will welcome the OECD network of parliamentary budget officers to Ottawa for their fifth annual meeting.

PBOs exist in Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Ireland, Australia and even Korea. As I said, the OECD network of PBOs is scheduled to meet in Ottawa to continue deliberations on improved parliamentary oversight of fiscal stimulus, deficits and risk management. It is most regrettable that they are arriving in this

country at the very moment in time when there is a dispute over providing important information to the PBO and when we are facing a vacuum in accessibility to his important expertise.

Other countries provide analogous examples of providing support to elected officials. For example, the Congressional Budget Office in the United States of America, created in 1975, provides budget committees and Congress with objective information about budgetary and economic issues.

As mentioned, strong support for an independent Parliamentary Budget Officer has been voiced by experts who lauded Canada for the initial establishment of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Dr. Wehner spoke of the need, and I quote:

...to protect and enhance the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. A number of countries are creating similar institutions, and the Parliament in Canada has really been at the cusp of this development. Internationally, the Parliamentary Budget Officer of Canada is very highly regarded, and it's certainly a major change, in my view, at least, in the degree the parliament in Canada has access to an independent, highly professional research capacity.

He then added:

I believe that some adjustments are possible to the legal framework for the Parliamentary Budget Officer. In particular, this role could be strengthened, or the status be strengthened, if he were a full officer of Parliament. Moreover, steps could be taken so that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has total access to all relevant information. In the past I believe there have been incidents where departments have not been quite as forthcoming with providing information to the Parliamentary Budget Officer as perhaps they should have been. But overall, I see this as a very positive development, and I see some scope for strengthening it also on the basis of international experience.

There we have it. Even international experts are watching what is happening in Canada and what will happen with our PBO.

New Democrats have long supported the establishment of an independent PBO. New Democrats stood in the House and voiced their support for the creation of a Parliamentary Budget Officer in 2006. We remain in support of the PBO, regrettably now under attack by members opposite.

It would serve members opposite well to be reminded of their own previous support of an independent PBO and the value of objective analysis. The Prime Minister in 2006 said:

Such a body would ensure that the government is genuinely accountable for taxpayers' dollars and that we maintain fiscal discipline

The finance minister in 2006 said:

Governments cannot be held to account if Parliament and Canadians do not know the real state of public finances.

In fact, the Conservative 2006 electoral platform endorsed the creation of an independent Parliamentary Budget Officer. How attitudes have changed. Time after time the PBO has faced delays or denials to his requests for financial information. As I mentioned, he was forced to take the matter to the Federal Court.

Business of Supply

Now in the face of his imminent termination, the government has dragged its feet in ensuring his timely replacement. The process for filling the PBO office took 18 months last time. MPs now will face review of the coming budget and estimates absent the PBO's analytical support. The simple answer is presented in this motion: extend the term of the current PBO.

What happened to the government members who once proposed support for the PBO?

I can personally attest to the value of his reporting and the assistance of his office in my participation in a parliamentary committee and my review of estimates.

We are meant to be stewards of the public purse. We can choose to support institutions that ensure informed decisions. An independent PBO reporting to Parliament offers that window. I call on all members to support this motion to make the PBO a true officer of Parliament.

•(1610)

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in listening to the interventions today by the NDP members on their opposition day motion, the member and several of the NDP members mentioned the existence of parliamentary budget offices, or some equivalent, in other countries. However, they do not talk about the structure or the relationship they share either to parliaments, legislatures or the executive.

For example, one of the other members mentioned earlier that in England, it is housed inside the treasury department. In Canada we choose to house it under the Library of Parliament. There are many models, and they can all work.

In this case, if we judge the independence of the current Parliamentary Budget Officer, he has been highly critical of the government and has not lost his job. His appointment comes from a non-partisan committee. The Prime Minister makes the appointment, but the nominees are all chosen that way.

Is it not, in fact, that there are a variety of options? This one is actually independent. In fact, it is better, because it is not housed in the treasury department and is providing the material necessary for members of Parliament on both sides of the House to hold the government to account.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, far be it from me to suggest that everybody copy what is done by the Government of Canada at this moment in time.

I can only attest to the expert testimony before our committee when we undertook a review of how we could strengthen the role of the PBO and support the role of MPs in reviewing estimates and supply. Resoundingly, all the experts made exactly the same recommendation, which was to make the Parliamentary Budget Officer a full officer of Parliament to ensure his independence, and furthermore, to expand his resources so we could fully build our capacity to review the estimates in supply.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member says that the Parliamentary Budget Officer should be an officer of Parliament. Could she provide some insight in terms of how she would envision such an individual being hired? There are different ways in which one could do that. I am interested in

knowing what she believes is the ideal way of hiring an independent officer of the House of Commons.

•(1615)

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, part of the way to ensure the integrity and respect of the Parliamentary Budget Officer who is being made a full officer of Parliament would be to have representation from all parties in the House for the selection and review process. That would be my recommendation.

However, the first step is to get the government to agree that the Parliamentary Budget Officer should become a full officer of Parliament. Then it should reach out to the other parties and discuss how that process may proceed.

I suggest that we take advantage of the meeting this month with the OECD network and seek its advice on how we might move forward.

Ms. Rathika Sitsabaiesan (Scarborough—Rouge River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2006, New Democrats and Conservatives worked together on the Federal Accountability Act. It was this partnership that allowed it to pass in a minority Parliament. This legislation would never have come about without the NDP's cooperation. Sadly, since then, the Conservatives have found and used loopholes in the law to skirt accountability, loopholes that we are trying to correct today.

Does the hon. member believe that we need to fix the legislation we have before us and that the Conservatives, government members and the NDP need to continue to work together in cooperation to fix this legislation, strengthen it and make it better so that the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer can actually have true clout and real teeth to continue doing the great work the Parliamentary Budget Officer has been doing?

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I am afraid that I want to reserve my judgment on whether we need to strengthen the legislation. That is exactly the issue the Parliamentary Budget Officer has referred to the courts.

His reading of the legislation, and frankly, my reading of the legislation, is that he has the full power to command that the information he has requested be provided.

What needs to be strengthened is the PBO budget and having the PBO made an independent, full officer of Parliament so that there would be less interference.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I rise today to speak to what is a very important motion. The Liberal Party has indicated that it will be supporting the motion, and for good reason. It is no surprise that the party will be supporting the motion in the sense that we have been talking about it a great deal.

Business of Supply

The leader of the Liberal Party has had the opportunity to ask a number of questions related to this issue, given the direct appeal to the Prime Minister to recognize how important it is that we give an extension to Mr. Page, the Parliamentary Budget Officer. He is our first Parliamentary Budget Officer. One reason the position receives worldwide recognition is because of the efforts of Mr. Page. We want to make sure that whoever replaces Mr. Page, as long as he or she is bilingual, we will be able to continue a very strong tradition of having a Parliamentary Budget Officer who contributes immensely to the way the House of Commons works in terms of accountability and transparency.

The member opposite said that at least we have not fired him. He has not lost his job, which means he is independent. Because Mr. Page still holds the job does not necessarily mean that the office is independent and meets the objectives suggested in the motion today. Moving toward true independence of the office is a step in the right direction. That is something we should be embracing. We should look at ways we can further enhance the parliamentary budget office.

In listening to the debate throughout the day, there were a number of things I could not help but notice. Many of the Conservative speakers would take today to reflect not necessarily on the parliamentary budget office but on the performance of the Conservatives. One after another they talked about how great things are here. Of course, they would talk about how bad it was in the 13 years prior to their arrival. They are somewhat selective in terms of what they bring to the table in making those presentations.

Some things are absent. For example, when the Conservatives took over the books, they had a huge surplus. That is a significant fact they never make reference to. They never make reference to the fact that they had a huge trade surplus. There are many things the previous government put in place that have had a very positive impact during the Conservatives' term in government. One reason the government has been able to succeed in certain areas, such as in our banking industry, is because of the previous government's regulations in the 1990s.

I would like to think that the focus of this debate is not necessarily on those types of issues. It should be on the parliamentary budget office and the role independent offices play. Earlier I articulated how things change through time. A number of years ago, we brought in the Parliamentary Budget Officer. That is a relatively new concept. It is proving to be very successful, and that is good, but it is nothing new in the sense that we have independent officers of the House. Provincial jurisdictions have independent officers, and they do a wonderful job on the tasks that have been assigned to them.

• (1620)

The auditor, for example, has been well established in Canada for many years. In fact, every province and I believe every territory has adopted an auditor. Federally we have the Auditor General and we have provincial auditors as well. They provide tangible results. Their budgets are allocated so that they are able to do the work that is necessary to cut through some of the political partisan ideas or statistics that come out.

A good example of that is the gun registry. If we listened to the Conservative line, we would have thought that the gun registry cost \$10 million to \$40 million a year to administer. We know that there

were some significant upfront costs, but the actual annual cost coming from the Auditor General was somewhere around \$3 million. This is important information to have because it assists in holding the government accountable.

As I said, the Auditor General has that opportunity from a different perspective. Once money has been spent or there are ideas or policies that have been put in place, auditor generals across the country are often called in to investigate and report back to their respective legislatures or to the House of Commons. Their reports are well read and there is this huge expectation that government will follow up on the recommendations that our auditors provide.

I have gone through years of listening to auditor reports being presented. In my case, it was primarily in the Manitoba legislature, but on a couple of occasions it was here in Ottawa in the House of Commons. When we go through the reports, we find that ministries respond to them. There is a sense of accountability to those reports. Opposition members are very reliant on the Auditor General making reports. The reports have helped shape public policy and have allowed us to reflect on some of the decisions that were made.

The establishment of the Parliamentary Budget Officer here in Canada five or six years ago is something that, in time, we are going to see more of. There is a relatively small number of countries that have parliamentary budget officers or the equivalent thereof. I suspect that as we continue in time, we will see different forms of this type of office established because there is great value in having that independent assessment done.

We need to recognize that Mr. Page, or the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, has a certain amount of expertise and resources that average members of the House of Commons do not have. When the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer uses those resources and that expertise, it is in a better position than we are to provide an analysis on the wide variety of issues that come before the House of Commons.

It is important that we make note of the degree to which government spends tax dollars. We are talking about billions and billions of dollars. In the next number of weeks we will receive a federal budget that will have an impact on every Canadian and permanent resident who calls Canada their home. That budget is being financed by tax dollars. Canadians want to know that there is value for the money that is being spent. They have a right to see whether that money is being spent appropriately and intelligently.

• (1625)

The Parliamentary Budget Officer plays a critical role in that. Today, more than ever before, there is a higher demand for transparency and accountability. I like to think that the Internet played a critical role in that. Information is so easily accessed today compared to 10 years ago. I have been an elected official for well over 20 years and I know the difference in research capabilities and how the Internet has opened up opportunities for Canadians from coast to coast to coast to get engaged in how those tax dollars are being spent.

Business of Supply

Therefore, there is a higher level of expectation. A higher level of accountability is required and more transparency is the order of the day. That is why I believe that going forward the Parliamentary Budget Officer, and the work that he or she is going to be doing, is going to become that much more critical. What the House should be doing is supporting that evolution and allowing the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to expand, with the idea that in fact there is great value there. We actually save money if we invest in this particular office and I would like to give a couple of examples of that.

Before I do, I want to highlight an issue where the Parliamentary Budget Officer played a very important role in appeasing the concerns and anxieties of a great number of Canadians from all over the country. I raised it earlier in the form of a question regarding the pension issue.

The Prime Minister was in Europe giving a speech. He made the decision that our pensions are in a bit of a crisis situation in Canada, and as such we would have to increase the age of retirement from age 65 to 67. That was the message that was given from overseas and it was communicated down from the Prime Minister's Office to all the different ministries and all the Conservative backbenchers. All of a sudden they started to create communications and speaking points that said we are in this crisis situation with an aging population. They had to create the impression that if we did not do this we would not be able to sustain pensions going forward.

Seniors from across Canada stood up and made very strong efforts, whether petitions, post cards, emails or letters. They got engaged on that particular issue. I suspect they met with some success because the government did not go as far as it was going to go. Instead, it just left the change from age 65 to 67.

My personal advice to the government would be to actually acknowledge that it has made a mistake here and put it back to age 65. That would be the smart thing to do because if it does not do it I can assure the House that a Trudeau-led government or a Marc Garneau-led government will do that. We will make that change and bring it back to age 65.

It was the Parliamentary Budget Officer who came out and said there is no crisis, that it was a minuscule fraction of a per cent. We would have to get out the old decimal in terms of the impact on the GDP. That is really all it was. Yet if people were to listen to the Conservative government, and after all that is who has the books, they would have thought that it was a serious crisis and that it was going to happen.

• (1630)

The Parliamentary Budget Officer was able to alleviate a lot of anxiety out there, because using the actual numbers he was able to demonstrate that Canadians did not have to be fearful, that the money and future revenues were there to sustain the fund so that we could in fact leave it at age 65, and that the sky was not in fact falling. That is one example.

Government makes serious policy changes. Let us remember the policy change that the government made on the 40-year mortgage. The Conservatives like to take a lot of the credit for former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, as minister of finance, when

they came out and said, "We want strong banking regulations." We had the 25-year mortgage. We saw the value of insuring that industry.

Thank goodness for that. Canada was almost alone in terms of when the banking industries around the world started to crash. Canada did exceptionally well. It had nothing to do with the current government. It was because of the former government. What did the Conservative government do when it took office? It actually came up with the 40-year mortgage. It took the idea from the States.

I give the government credit, after a little period of time it recognized that it was a bad policy and reversed it. Now we are going back to the 25-year mortgage. It is good that it made that change. However, I suspect that if the Parliamentary Budget Officer had the opportunity to do the assessment, and it is quite possible that he had already done the assessment although I am not 100% sure of that, we would find that the numbers would have reinforced the reason why it was good to make the change the government made.

At the end of the day what we really want to see is acknowledgement from the government that, given the billions of tax dollars that the government is going to be proposing to spend in the upcoming weeks, it makes sense to give an extension to Mr. Page's contract. He needs to stick around for at least a few more months. Even if somehow we get that new Parliamentary Budget Officer appointed, there is an argument to be made that there is nothing wrong with having Mr. Page around because of the numbers. He is familiar with the numbers.

I would ultimately argue that the leader of the Liberal Party was correct when he challenged the Prime Minister to ensure that office had someone in place. We are suggesting that it should be Mr. Page, at least for the next couple of months, so that we can ensure we have the right person, whoever he or she might be. It is the responsible thing to do.

In terms of the future of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, I think we should be looking at ways in which we can make it truly more independent and more effective. We think it is an issue of priorities. We believe there is in fact great value to having a healthy, strong, parliamentary budget office. At the end of the day, the numbers that it provides and the information that it gives us are very important.

A good example of that would be the F-35. Let us think about the F-35, the benefits of the Parliamentary Budget Officer and how much money Mr. Page would have saved the taxpayer. Again, we are talking about billions of dollars.

• (1635)

I would suggest that the Parliamentary Budget Officer has proved how effective and how valuable that office is to every Canadian taxpayer, to every Canadian citizen and resident of our country, and provides an enormous service to the House of Commons. We should support it by giving that extension and by looking at ways we can make it truly more independent—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Just as a reminder to all hon. members, there have been some occurrences today where members have mentioned the proper names of other hon. members. This is something that can happen quite easily, but I just remind hon. members that it is in fact prohibited in the standing orders.

Business of Supply

I know members are waiting for questions and comments, but before we get to that, it is my duty, pursuant to Standing Order 38, to inform the House that the questions to be raised tonight at the time of adjournment are as follows: the hon. member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, in respect to Veterans; the hon. member for Montcalm, concerning Persons with Disability; and third, the hon. member for Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, concerning Housing.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Burlington.

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments of the member opposite. I do not agree with most of what he said.

A colleague from the Liberal Party who spoke earlier did say that governments do, from time to time, make mistakes. That individual acknowledged that, which was great.

My question to the member opposite is: Was it a mistake of the previous Liberal government not to have put in place a Parliamentary Budget Officer? Was that a mistake by the Liberal Party, yes or no?

• (1640)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Yes, Mr. Speaker, governments do make mistakes. A good example of that is the one I just used about the 40-year mortgage and the impact that will have on Canadian consumers from coast to coast to coast.

It was not a mistake when Paul Martin recognized that there was a need to investigate issues related to a few bad apples, and ultimately we saw the Gomery inquiry. At the end of the day there was more accountability. I think there was a need.

At different times, there is a higher need to have different forms of accountability. What I see today is a Parliamentary Budget Officer whose office is warranted. It is not warranted because of a particular incident. It is warranted because, as we get more transparency and there is a higher demand for accountability, we are seeing offices of this nature established not only in Canada but in other countries of the world. This is relatively new to the world, not just to—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Surrey North.

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in 2006, the NDP pushed the minority Conservative government to form this office. The Conservatives often talk about transparency and accountability. Yet we have an outstanding PBO who has done a brilliant job over the last number of years, and whenever Conservatives try to hide things or they do not want to let Canadians know, the PBO has continuously exposed the Conservatives, whether it is the OAS file, the F-35s or the budget estimates for deficits.

The member for Winnipeg North has talked about how the Conservatives do not want to talk about budget deficits. Ever since they have been in government, they have not had even one surplus.

My question for the hon. member for Winnipeg North is: Why would the Conservatives not want to strengthen this office to report to Parliament? Why are they against this? Are they against transparency and accountability?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, let me pick up on the member's point with regard to the F-35, and in my comments he might get the answer.

The government itself told us that it had found this wonderful fighter jet and told us what it would cost. Opposition parties, led by the Liberal Party, ultimately said that the government was under-estimating the cost of the F-35 and that the way in which it got the contract was all wrong. I suspect it was pretty tough on the Prime Minister's Office when the independent Parliamentary Budget Officer said that the government's numbers were all wrong. That is something opposition parties were saying, that the Government of Canada was not being honest. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has access to the numbers, and because he had access to the numbers he was able to clearly demonstrate to all Canadians in an independent fashion that the government was not telling the full truth in regard to the actual cost of the F-35. As a result, the taxpayer will be saved billions of dollars.

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, early in the member's intervention he talked about how we brought in the independent Parliamentary Budget Office, as if somehow he had something to do with that. It should be noted for the record that the Liberals voted against that, and now he wants to take credit for it. Let us give credit where credit is due.

In his intervention and throughout his questions, he kept talking about parliamentary budget offices around the world being similar without actually talking about them contextually. I mentioned earlier that the UK parliamentary budget office is housed in the treasury department. In the United States it serves Congress. Every parliamentary budget office in the world is connected to the branch of government that formulates the budget, and in parliamentary systems that should be connected to the government, not to the Parliament. In Canada, the Parliamentary Budget Office is connected to the Library of Parliament for independence, not to the executive branch.

Is the member saying that every parliamentary budget office and comparable office in the world is somehow not independent, including Canada's?

• (1645)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, I liked the member's opening remarks when he said "let us give credit where credit is due". I would reinforce that particular point after listening to a number of his colleague's speeches. You should be giving credit to Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien in terms of the budget surplus you inherited. You should be giving credit for the trade surplus that Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Prime Minister Paul Martin provided to your government.

More specifically to the question that was asked, I am suggesting to you that the concept of parliamentary budget officers is relatively new in the world. Some countries have had this position longer than others. Canada is relatively new. I suspect—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order. I will just give another reminder to all hon. members to direct their comments and commentary through the chair, not directly to other members, and avoid using second person references.

Questions and comments. The hon. member for Charlottetown.

Business of Supply

Mr. Sean Casey (Charlottetown, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my question to the hon. member specifically relates to the potential for delay. We are coming up on a critical period in terms of the budget cycle nationally. The end of the fiscal year is upon us. The main estimates and the budget are coming up in fairly short order. If the term of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is allowed to lapse and there is a gap, I would invite my hon. colleague's comments on the impact that would have on transparency in this critical period.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, what I like about the member for Charlottetown is that he gets right to the core of the issue, and the core of the issue is just that. We need to recognize that we are at a very critical time. Within weeks we are going to see a federal budget, and there is a strong likelihood that we will not have a Parliamentary Budget Officer. The valuable contributions that officer can play in terms of the billions of dollars that will be proposed to be spent are enormous. It would be highly irresponsible for the government of the day not to recognize that. The member is trying to pick up on that. The leader of the Liberal Party has been asking about this same issue in question period in recent days.

We are asking the government to recognize that fact and to provide assurances to all Canadians that we will not be without a Parliamentary Budget Officer at the time the budget itself is released and the weeks that follow. We need the government to come clean on that.

[Translation]

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have the pleasure, on behalf of the official opposition, of concluding the debate on this very important motion.

I would like the backbench members of the Conservative government to pay particular attention because this affects them as much as it affects opposition members.

The office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is non-partisan and so does research for all parties, particularly in an extremely complex area in which we, as parliamentarians and members of Parliament, have very few resources.

We are well aware that backbench members on the government side are about as much in the dark as we are when it comes time to examine budgets, because all powers in relation to budgets are in the hands of the Department of Finance, which answers to the Minister of Finance. The Department of Finance does not answer to Parliament, it answers to the Minister of Finance, and so to cabinet.

That is why I would like to have the Conservative backbench members' attention during my speech. These decisions affect them as much as they affect us. We want to have an office, like the office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, that can shed light and force the Department of Finance, the Minister of Finance and cabinet to be a little more accountable and transparent.

I would like to recall what the legislation says:

79.2 The mandate of the Parliamentary Budget Officer is to:

(a) provide independent analysis to the Senate and the House of Commons about the state of the nation's finances, the estimates of the government and trends in the national economy.

•(1650)

This is a very important element, since we have recently witnessed several attempts by members of the Conservative government cabinet in particular to create confusion regarding the role and mandate of the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

His role is not, as some, including the President of the Treasury Board and the Minister of Finance, have claimed, simply to examine the money spent by the federal government and by cabinet. His role is to examine the state of the national economy and provide independent analyses about matters relating to the economy and the budget that he considers to be of significant interest both to parliamentarians and to the Canadian public.

Another part of its mandate is, at the request of the Standing Senate Committee on National Finance, standing committees of the House of Commons, or the House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Accounts, to provide analyses and reports on matters that come to their attention. At the request of any parliamentary committee, it must conduct studies that review government estimates. Lastly, at the request of any parliamentary committee or any member of the House, it must assess the financial cost of any proposed measure within the government's areas of jurisdiction.

Once again, an important role played by the Parliamentary Budget Officer or the PBO's office is analyzing the financial and budget implications of private members' bills. Unfortunately, the PBO has been unable to achieve this objective because of the lack of resources allocated from the very outset; but I will return to this point later.

After having listened to many speeches in the House from the opposition and the government, what strikes me is the offhanded attitude of government MPs towards this issue.

•(1655)

It needs to be taken seriously. Canada is a G8 economy, but at the moment, I get the impression that we are operating like a banana republic. The hope has been that the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer can counterbalance analyses by the Department of Finance, but at the end of the day, it cannot because it has neither the resources, nor the independence or autonomy required to do so.

I would like to compare the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer to a successful example of how a budgetary and financial analysis tool ought to function; I am referring to the United States Congressional Budget Office. For the benefit of the House, I would like to review the details of how it came about.

The CBO was established in 1974, mainly to counter the growing powers being appropriated by Richard Nixon, the president at the time, who was able to seize powers by hiding information from members of Congress. A mechanism was needed to enable members of Congress, whether in the Senate or the House of Representatives, to obtain the information they needed before it could be concealed by the Office of the President.

Business of Supply

The Congressional Budget Office was established at the time for a very specific purpose, one that very closely parallels what we are experiencing at the moment: the need to check the growing powers being assumed by the Office of the Prime Minister and cabinet at the expense of parliamentarians responsible for guaranteeing transparency and accountability.

I would like to compare the establishment of the CBO and of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer because there are many similarities between the two processes, and between the objectives that those establishing them had in mind.

I would like to quote from Robert Reischauer, a former director of the Congressional Budget Office, who was there when it was established—not as the director, but he was there. He described how Congress attempted to weaken the powers of the CBO when it was being established:

[English]

What the House wanted [when the CBO was created] was basically a manhole in which Congress would have a bill or something and it would lift up the manhole cover and put the bill down it, and 20 minutes later a piece of paper would be handed up, with the cost estimate, the answer, on it. No visibility, [just] some kind of mechanism down below the ground level doing this...non controversial [work], the way the sewer system [does].

[Translation]

So that really gives you an idea of the state of mind of the U.S. Congress, which did not want the Republican party, the party in power at the time, to declaw the office, which was responsible for providing independent, non-partisan financial analysis to which members of Congress did not have access.

• (1700)

However, Mr. Reischauer, like many of his colleagues, opposed the will of the CBO, somewhat as Kevin Page did, to defend the independence, autonomy and non-partisan nature of his office. A few days ago, however, the Minister of Finance said this on Global TV:

[English]

—the idea...was that the parliamentary budget officer would kind of work like the congressional budget officer in the United States to report to the elected people in the House of Commons about how the government was doing in its budgeting. Sort of being a sounding board, a testing board.

[Translation]

This clearly shows that the Minister of Finance has no knowledge about the role of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, nor has he given it careful thought. Either that or he really wants to try, five years after it was created, to make it as harmless as the members of the U. S. Congress wanted to make their office when it was established. However, the Conservatives, the Minister of Finance and the members of the former Reform Party have not always thought that way.

What was the original idea in creating the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, according to the Reform Party at the time and the Federal Accountability Act, which we supported in 2006? That idea was clearly stated.

I would like to thank Paul Wells, who managed to find this quotation from Monte Solberg, a prominent former Reform Party

MP. In 2004, he expressed the party's desire for such an office as follows:

[English]

It would be an independent body that would answer to Parliament and would not be part of the government. It would not be a situation where the government could manipulate the figures to its own ends.

[Translation]

That is not what the government did. By placing the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer under the authority of the Library of Parliament from 2006 to 2008—which meant that the Parliamentary Budget Officer served at the pleasure of the Prime Minister, who could dismiss him if he wished—the Conservative government wilfully restricted the Parliamentary Budget Officer's independence and autonomy.

The Conservatives thought that, by appointing Kevin Page to the position in 2008, with the constraints that were placed on him, they could guarantee themselves a good little lap dog, a poodle. However, instead of that—and to Mr. Page's credit—they got themselves a pit bull who chose to champion government accountability and transparency.

The office exists today. It is our parliamentary duty, on both the opposition and government sides, to provide it with all the tools, autonomy and independence it needs, along with more resources so that it can do its work properly for the benefit and efficiency of our work as parliamentarians.

There are currently nine to twelve employees who work in the office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, and some positions have yet to be filled. The office has a budget of less than \$3 million. By comparison, the American CBO has about 250 employees and has a budget of nearly \$50 million. The CPB in the Netherlands, which has a similar role, has 170 employees. The National Assembly Budget Office in South Korea has 135 employees. The office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer has nine to twelve employees to do the work.

Organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the OECD, have spoken about and continue to speak about the need for an independent analysis office that answers to Parliament. In a recent OECD document published in 2007 and subsequently updated, the OECD identifies three principles for independent budgetary institutions, such as the office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. It is worth going over these details, because they are at the heart of the difference in interpretation of the role of the PBO that the NDP and the government members have been expressing today.

Business of Supply

The first principle for this office is the guarantee of independence and long-term sustainability. The OECD stresses the importance of the office being non-partisan, something that is constantly being challenged by the Conservatives. In their minds, being non-partisan means agreeing with them. The Parliamentary Budget Officer has a very high level of technical expertise. This office performs miracles with what little means it has, but it lacks the resources to do its job properly. The appointment process for an officer is very important. There must be a process, and that is why we are calling for the creation of the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer. The Parliamentary Budget Officer would thereby be an officer of Parliament and not an employee appointed by the Prime Minister who could be fired at the Prime Minister's will. Sure, we could talk about the Library of Parliament committee, but this committee is not non-partisan. The government always has the majority on that committee.

There also needs to be long-term stable funding. I remind government members who oppose enhancing the means and the independence of the office that when the report on the costs generated by our involvement in Afghanistan was released by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, the government immediately threatened to reduce his budget from \$2.8 million, down to \$1.8 million. In fact, at the time, he was only able to preserve his budget and resources by making compromises on his degree of independence and autonomy. These conditions had been imposed on him by the Library of Parliament.

The second principle presented by the OECD, which is also a condition for having a functional office, is the ability to lead truly independent analyses. This includes having access to the information needed to conduct the studies. Let us not forget, and government members are well aware of that, that the Parliamentary Budget Officer must now turn to the courts to obtain the information that he needs to conduct the studies that could shed light on government spending, including the positions that are targeted and eliminated through government cutbacks.

As parliamentarians, we do not get that information from the government. It refuses to give us that information, and it refuses to give it to the Parliamentary Budget Officer who, if he were an officer of Parliament, would have the necessary authority to obtain it, without having to go to court.

Another aspect related to the ability to conduct truly independent analyses is the maintaining of cordial relations without compromising the independence of his office. We all know that, following all the analyses and reports released by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, several Conservative members have been openly hostile and certain cabinet members have shown a great deal of contempt toward him, which is totally unacceptable.

The third element, which is also a sensitive issue among our Conservative friends, is the fact that this issue has an impact on the public. To a large degree, it means there is a need to have an independent and open relationship with the media, in order to be able to get the information out.

• (1705)

If you recall, when the position was first created, the Parliamentary Librarian tried to muzzle Mr. Page by preventing

him from giving the media the information that he had prepared for the benefit of the Canadian people and for use by parliamentarians.

A number of the reports prepared by the Parliamentary Budget Officer or his office spurred healthy debate in the House of Commons. These include the sustainability of pensions, the cost of fighting crime with more jail sentences, freezing or cutting expenditures, security costs at the G8 and G20 summits, forecasts on the eve of the 2008 financial and economic crisis and, finally, the cost of the F-35 fighter jets.

We should remember that many of these reports contradicted what the government said about many issues, including the F-35s. This has been mentioned a number of times today.

It just amazes me to hear them say that we do not need to give the Parliamentary Budget Officer more power because the departments and the ministers provide the information. We have proven over and over again that a number of the debates triggered by the PBO's reports and analyses have brought to light many issues, many weaknesses in the Conservative administration that eventually led to debate in the House. It would not have happened had the departments, ministers and cabinet members been allowed to decide whether to provide the information or not.

I will talk about another curious aspect of the debate on sustainability of pensions. The Parliamentary Budget Officer studied the impact of the aging population, a study that the Minister of Finance had promised with the 2007 budget and that was needed for long-term planning. The study was probably done, but the minister refuses to submit it to Parliament. The Parliamentary Budget Officer carried out his own study—which the minister rejected—but was unable to submit it to Parliament for a debate on this important issue. This report was prepared using public money and it is probably sitting on a shelf at the Department of Finance or in the minister's office.

It is important to note that Canada is lagging behind other OECD countries. As I said, Canada is a G8 country. We should act like a G8 country by ensuring a maximum level of democracy, transparency and accountability when it comes to assessing our public finances.

Earlier I mentioned the conditions imposed by the OECD to ensure a functional PBO office or other similar functions. I can substantiate that with comments made by Dr. Alice Rivlin who was the first CBO in the United States. She faced a similar struggle against the government powers of the day, who were also trying to limit the CBO's authority. In the 1970s, she established the three main principles underlying the work of a good watchdog, from an economic and budgetary perspective.

Here are the three elements. The first is independence, pure and simple. At present, no matter what our Conservative friends may say, our Parliamentary Budget Officer is not independent. He works for the Library of Parliament and reports to a committee—the Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament—on which the Conservatives have a majority.

Business of Supply

Secondly, the non-partisan nature of the position is important. The PBO can examine bills put forward by the NDP, the Liberals and the Conservatives, for he is non-partisan.

The third principle is empirical objectivity, which ensures the benefit of technical and financial resources to conduct proper economic studies based on empirical evidence and theories.

At present, the PBO cannot do this. That is why we are asking that this individual be made an officer of Parliament. This position will not be filled in time for his departure, so we are asking that Mr. Page be reappointed to the position. We are not the only ones asking for this.

In all the media, whether left, right or centre, I have heard pundits talking about the importance of the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer. There is a general consensus on this within Canadian society and among those who care about these things. The Conservatives do not share this consensus, but they are the only ones who do not want to give the Parliamentary Budget Officer greater powers, more independence and more resources.

In passing, I would like to quote Ian Lee, whom the government often calls on for committee studies. He said that it is very important that the PBO be transformed into an officer of Parliament.

To conclude, I would like to say that the issue is important to backbenchers. Should the NDP replace them in 2015, I can guarantee that if the Parliamentary Budget Officer is not an officer of Parliament, it will be the first request they make as the opposition.

[*English*]

Mr. Jeff Watson (Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated what I thought was a substantive intervention by the member opposite. It is the first time we heard some of the definition of what he thought would constitute independence and how they were appointed. They are appointed from a pool of nominees from a non-partisan organization. The Prime Minister makes the appointment, but he does not choose who the people are from whom he has to appoint. That is independence.

“Whether or not the PBO does opposition research” is effectively what I heard, and “is he taking up the issues of the opposition?” I would say that shows proper independence. He has done a lot of research that the opposition has found valuable to use on the government. On resourcing, while the member bemoans the proportional resourcing for a country one-tenth the size of the United States, for example, 150 reports in five years does not sound like there is no independence for the Parliamentary Budget Officer.

Is the member saying that the Parliamentary Budget Officer is not independent?

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his very relevant question. It gets to the heart of the definition of independence.

In 2008, when the Parliamentary Budget Officer tried to table his office's reports—independently prepared reports on important issues involving government operations—they tried to muzzle him and

keep him from presenting his research to Parliament and to Canadians.

The issue of independence is not about knowing who will be chosen, it is knowing what flexibility and autonomy the PBO will be granted so that he can do research to table reports in Parliament and make analyses that will be taken seriously so that the government can be forced to be accountable and transparent. Independence is an important issue, and it extends beyond the selection process. The PBO must also be given the authority to act.

As an officer of Parliament, the PBO would have full independence and could not, as is the case now, be fired by the Prime Minister—that could happen because he is currently at the Prime Minister's beck and call.

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate my colleague's definition. It appears that the members on the other side of the House do not understand the definition of an independent officer, someone who can really speak to Canadians and be accountable to them.

I have a question for my colleague. I am a member of the Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament. One of the recommendations made in the 2009 report was as follows:

That the Speakers of the Senate and the House of Commons request the Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament to evaluate the effectiveness of the position of the Parliamentary Budget Officer commencing on the third anniversary of his appointment.

This review should have been done in 2011, and so far, it still has not been done. What does my colleague think of the fact that this was never done?

Mr. Guy Caron: Mr. Speaker, this is a crucial matter that strikes at the core of the independence issue.

Frankly, I am even wondering if the Library of Parliament should conduct this review, because the position of Parliamentary Budget Officer should not answer to the Library of Parliament. It should not answer to an institution that itself answers to the Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament, which is a committee made up of members of Parliament, the majority of whom come from the government.

When talking independence, these are all relevant issues that should be clearly defined. For instance, the previous member asked a question about independence in terms of the appointment, but what kind of independence, what kind of autonomy does the Parliamentary Budget Officer really have when he is threatened with cuts to his funding—almost half of his budget—immediately after publishing a damning report about the total cost of our intervention in Afghanistan? How can the Parliamentary Budget Officer operate effectively and independently when he does not know what kind of reprisals his office will suffer if the government is unhappy with a study?

In my opinion, these are key elements and they should be compelling arguments for ensuring that the Parliamentary Budget Officer becomes an officer of Parliament reporting not only to the Prime Minister, not only to the Library of Parliament, not only to the Standing Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament, but to Parliament as a whole, because he is working for all of us and for all Canadians.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:15 p.m., pursuant to an order made earlier today, all questions necessary to dispose of the opposition motion are deemed put and a recorded division deemed requested and deferred until Tuesday, February 12, 2013, at the expiry of the time provided for government orders.

• (1715)

[English]

Hon. Gordon O'Connor: Mr. Speaker, I ask that you see the clock at 5:30 p.m.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): It being 5:30 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private member's business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[Translation]

AIR PASSENGERS' BILL OF RIGHTS

Mr. José Nunez-Melo (Laval, NDP) moved that Bill C-459, An Act respecting the rights of air passengers, be read the second time and referred to a committee.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to commence debate on my private member's bill—Bill C-459, An Act respecting the rights of air passengers.

The important thing to mention is that there is nothing new here. This is not the first time that a private member's bill of this kind has been introduced. In the second session of the 40th Parliament, there was an attempt to pass a bill that was somewhat similar to this one in certain respects.

At the time, the bill had been aborted clumsily following the release of the fourth report of the Standing Committee on Transport, Infrastructure and Communities. Most of the Conservative members made the patently irresponsible mistake of deciding not to pursue study of the bill, for a reason that made no sense. They had understood that the act was an attempt to assign air carriers a nonexistent responsibility.

I must admit that I was surprised to learn why the study was abandoned and the process leading up to it. I was dumbfounded and could simply not understand it. I asked myself how members of the committee that is basically responsible for adding certain details or simply some clarity to a number of sections could possibly have failed in their duty by ruling so arbitrarily on the matter without any further justifications.

Private Members' Business

On the one hand, I am convinced that the House will view this bill as a second opportunity to correct a past mistake and to rapidly approve a good, more exhaustive and more precise act. On the other hand, if it should prove necessary to refer it to a committee, then the committee should at least do a serious and non-partisan analysis of it. This committee strikes me as far better prepared and more aware of issues surrounding respect for consumers.

My view is that the improvements made to this bill emphasize passenger rights and create conditions favourable to an approach that makes everyone in the relationship a winner, both passengers and carriers. We have placed a clear emphasis on eliminating poor business practices, such as deliberate overbooking.

We are trying to make the Government of Canada understand that it can no longer remain so isolated and insensitive to responsible business practices. Such practices often result in customer loyalty. Customers appreciate being shown respect, and treated fairly and transparently.

An approach in which everyone wins is clearly a better idea. The improvements and added clarity in this new version of the bill eliminate any ambiguity in situations where it is obvious that responsibility ought to rest with the air carriers. The bill specifically states that weather events are not the fault of the carrier.

• (1720)

That is also the case when one of the government agencies decides to ground a plane and prevent it from taking off because there is an identifiable danger to passenger safety.

These agencies also have improved operational processes and adhere strictly to a set of regulations they are required to follow by law. What we want to tackle is the dishonesty on the part of a carrier that deliberately, for its own benefit, exploits the practice of overbooking or invents false weather conditions.

Overbooking often results from poor risk assessments. To put it clearly, this is what happens when a carrier sells seats it does not have, and charges its customers for them, over a period of several weeks. To put it even more clearly, after assigning a plane with a capacity of 200 seats to a particular route, it sells 210 tickets. After assessing the risk of no shows, as they are called in the business, it can expect that a maximum of 195 passengers will ultimately come to the counter. In that case, it can be said to have assessed its risk properly, and so it is not in danger of any constraint under this bill.

This practice has become so common that mistakes and miscalculations by managers are in fact commonplace. The situation then becomes unacceptable when all 210 passengers do show.

Disinformation is rare, but it does happen; the goal is to conceal the real cause of a delay or cancellation. The carrier does not want to admit that a mistake was made and uses every means necessary to try not to look like it is at fault.

Private Members' Business

What the bill seeks to do is hold the carrier accountable so that it will deal with the situation transparently and offer to refund the value of the ticket to passengers who are adversely affected, in addition to compensation for the inconvenience, and do so proactively and with full acknowledgement of its mistake. The carrier must formally undertake to offer rerouting at no extra cost, and with compensation, if it knows that another flight has seats available for the same destination.

Offering rerouting often involves a lengthy wait. Depending on how long the passenger will have to wait, refreshments, meals, accommodation, transportation and calling cards are provided for as additional compensation.

This bill is also a step forward toward international standardization. It will put Canada in the vanguard, or at least enable it to catch up in comparison to existing legislation in this area.

In Europe, there has been similar legislation since 2004 and some Canadian carriers are required to abide by it. There is legislation in Asia, particularly in the Philippines. And more recently, in December, our American neighbours enacted an equivalent law.

● (1725)

If the previous version of this bill had been passed in 2009, Canada would not be lagging behind and would not be seen as a follower, even though the headquarters of the International Civil Aviation Organization is in Canada.

Right now, we have the opportunity to quickly pass this good bill and to give our hon. colleagues a chance to fix their past mistakes. We can be sure that this initiative will have tangible benefits for passengers and will also have a positive economic impact on the air carriers.

In closing, I ask all members in the House to consider this bill. I urge them to support this initiative that is widely supported by the public.

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I would like to thank my colleague from Laval, who provided such a good explanation of this practical initiative that will help consumers. As the deputy critic for consumer protection, I am delighted with this initiative.

I think this is a simple initiative, and sometimes it is the simple things that make a difference. All members of the House have probably been in similar situations. They have probably all experienced delays or paid too much.

As my colleague from Laval explained so well, many companies already offer some compensation to passengers. Passing this bill will make this a common practice for all airlines.

I would like my colleague to talk more about the possibility of having an international standard.

Mr. José Nunez-Melo: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Québec.

As I was explaining, in 2004 legislation was enacted that covers most European countries and sets out specific dollar amounts for passenger compensation in the event of a poor practice such as a delay, denied boarding or other inconveniences.

This is becoming the norm. Naturally, airlines have also adopted standards, as I was explaining about risk assessment. Airlines do not expect all passengers who have purchased a ticket to show up. They know that some passengers will be inconvenienced, and all they can really say is that it is their fault. This law is proactive.

● (1730)

[*English*]

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this bill is an incarnation of a bill presented by Mr. Jim Maloway, a former member of the House and a great consumer protection advocate. I wonder if the hon. member would inform the House as to what substantial changes were made to this draft of the bill compared to the previous draft, with reflection of the fact that the Canadian Transportation Agency on June 28, 2012, provided a wide-scope definition to expected tariffs, expected liabilities and expected treatment of passengers in various situations.

That ruling was made after the previous bill was tabled in the House. How has that impacted the construction of this particular bill?

Mr. José Nunez-Melo: Mr. Speaker, yes, that is what happened. We took the former project that was submitted in the previous Parliament and we analyzed all the clauses from *a* to *z*. In fact, I was surprised by the conclusion of the report by the committee because there were only small changes that we had to make to make it more specific.

The reason that was given was the word “fundamental” had not been included throughout the clauses. Therefore, we revised it completely from *a* to *z* and we changed and rephrased many phrases. All of them were improved and updated.

Mr. Pierre Poilievre (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities and for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to address this esteemed chamber again.

It has been my purpose in politics in my own small way to help expand free choice so people can earn success, take responsibility for their lives and enjoy the maximum spectrum of choice they can possibly enjoy.

That ideal of free enterprise, free exchange, has delivered humanity the most unprecedented buildup in prosperity in all of known history. That can only happen when we limit government to doing the things that people cannot do for themselves, which brings us to the question before the House today, and the overall airline industry and its service to customers.

Private Members' Business

What we see when we look at this industry is that the vast increase in choice and quality of service the industry has experienced is the result of decisions by governments over the last 25 years to allow free enterprise competition to lead the way. We have commercialized our airports, we have privatized areas that were formerly government controlled and we have given consumers the tools to make decisions for themselves.

The advent of the Internet has allowed consumers to compare prices and make purchase decisions in a way that was not even imagined 15 or 20 years ago. The power of a traveller to go online and investigate all of the pricing options and review the service of all of the other passengers who have written public reviews is a far greater power for that customer than anything we in this chamber could impose upon the industry or upon the customers.

Our role then is to continue to empower the customer to enjoy maximum service, so how are we doing that?

First, we are signing agreements with countries around the world to allow their carriers to compete for Canadian customers and our carriers to compete for their customers. This gives Canadian business a world of customers and Canadians customers a world of choice. The best thing we can do to enhance the service and treatment of customers who use airlines for transportation is to give them more choice and more competition.

Second, we are giving them more information. Our government instituted the "what you see is what you get" pricing system, wherein an airline has to advertise the real price of the ticket, not just the base price. That avoids the situation of a customer, a passenger purchasing a flight and then learning that it is far more expensive than the advertised rate that was offered.

When the passenger gets on the flight and has an unfortunate experience, the greatest penalty to the sector is the devastating effect of word-of-mouth criticism by the passenger, because other people will refuse to take the same airline if they hear enough anecdotal evidence of bad treatment. Therefore, it is already in the interest of airlines to provide the best quality service they can, or risk losing out to competition. Because of new competition from airline carriers like WestJet and now Porter and others, Air Canada has to work extra hard to retain its passenger base.

At the same time, we monitor the kinds of complaints that come from the sector. In 2011-12 the Canadian Transportation Agency received a total of 518 air travel complaints, 499 for informal facilitation and 19 for formal adjudication, not including an additional 77 complaints that had not been resolved in the previous year.

• (1735)

Let us put this in perspective. We are talking about 518 complaints out of 78.4 million passenger flights travelled. Clearly, the passenger understands that the airline industry has to respond to them, or the passenger can seek another carrier for the services sought. However, that brings about debate here in this House of Commons on this and so many other issues.

On this side of the House, we believe in maximum choice and competition. We believe in empowering customers. The NDP believes in empowering bureaucracy. We believe in allowing

business to run business. The NDP wants to run everyone else's business. The NDP believes in nationalizing whole sections of the Canadian economy and has opposed privatization of enterprises that the vast majority of Canadians believe the government has no business running. It is with that mentality that the NDP comes forward with Bill C-459.

I will share more statistics. Of the 365 air travel disputes addressed through the Canadian Transportation Agency's informal resolution process, 293 were settled through facilitation. With respect to the formal process in the same period, 13 air travel disputes were resolved through adjudication. Again, that is out of 78 million passenger flights.

I think we can all agree that we have a system that works. The data clearly demonstrates that the agency performs a useful task and a constructive function when it comes to responding to the few customer complaints in the airline sector, without onerous regulations or court action. The compensation afforded to passengers for various infractions identified in the bill would supercede a function that is already performed by the existing agency.

One layer of government is never enough for the NDP members. They always want layer upon layer. They want an apartment building of layers of bureaucratic regulation and duplication to address every problem, real or perceived.

Given that the bill is largely silent with respect to how customers would obtain the monetary compensation laid out in the bill, disputes could be channelled to the courts, which would be an additional burden on all parties. Therefore, where we have a simplified, streamlined system that allows customers to address their legitimate concerns within the system in a timely fashion and at limited cost to Canadian taxpayers, the NDP would force customers into the courthouses, enriching lawyers at the expense of both the passenger and the business.

That is not the solution. At least, that is not the Canadian way. In fact, it seems a lot more like a litigious American approach to a problem that is otherwise resolved through commercial competition and dispute mediation.

The danger of the bill is that it might place an important additional regulatory burden on air carriers that would render them unable to compete with their international peers. While the bill recognizes that the carrier should not be held responsible for cancellations due to weather or other extraordinary circumstances or incidents that are caused by other parties, the burden of proof would remain on the carrier. That would mean more cost for the carrier. What do carriers have to do when they face increased costs? They have to pass them on to the passengers. The very people the NDP purports to be helping would be paying the price.

I would also note that the biggest variable cost to our air carriers is fuel. What would drive up the cost of fuel more than anything? It would be a carbon tax. There would be taxes, regulation, bureaucracy and the command and control and big government. On this side, we reject those ideas in favour of more freedom and more choice.

Private Members' Business

• (1740)

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we have a clearer picture this time around as to where the government is going to stand on this particular issue.

It is obvious it will not be supporting Bill C-459. That is a little different from the position it took in the past. Members of the House who have been around for a little while will recall that this is not the first time this issue has come forward. I am not speaking about the efforts of Mr. Jim Maloway, consumer protection advocate, who did a great job introducing a bill in a previous Parliament. He is not here today, but his bill is being echoed in the current mover's presentation.

There was an earlier attempt to provide consumer protection for airline passengers, and that occurred in 2008. In May 2008, I submitted a motion for consideration by this House, that the House call upon the government to enact an airline passenger bill of rights similar in context and form to that presented to the European Union Parliament and passed, and also similar to legislation before the U.S. Congress at that time.

That motion would have put statutory effect to airline passenger rights. Now, the interesting thing is that the government was all for it, on its face. While the government suggested it was in support of enhancing and protecting airline passenger rights, it was doing something very different on the inside. What the government was doing was contacting its buddies, and this was only revealed through access to information.

The government members voted 100% in favour of the motion to enact legislative, statutory protections to airline passengers. The Minister of Transport voted in favour of doing that. The entire front bench, in fact every Conservative member of the caucus, voted for my motion.

What we found out, though, was that was not what the Conservatives were doing on the inside. Through some very skilful investigative journalism by some members of our press gallery, it was discovered that while they were suggesting they were in favour of this and actually voted for it in the House, a member of the transport minister's office, Paul Fitzgerald of Lawrence Cannon's office, was actually writing to lobbyists from the airline industry.

He was saying that they were going to have to do some lobbying to stop this motion in its tracks, and that if they did not lobby the Grits, the Conservatives were going to find themselves in the position where they were outvoted by the opposition parties. Fitzgerald added that he did not want the government to be forced into regulating passenger protection issues.

Now what the Conservatives did, after actually saying that they did not want to be forced into regulating passenger protection issues, was that they voted for it. Imagine the contempt, the pure raw contempt of what this place is all about. This is a legislative body.

What we say in here is what we say to the country, and when we say in here that we support airline passenger rights and we are actually going to put our stamp on that by standing in our place and voting for it, we do not actually go out and commission lobbyists saying, "Let us scuttle this. Let us get this done. Let us create a pack of lies. Let us try to create much innuendo about this. Let us try to smear this effort. Let us try to make sure that the Canadian public

turns against those who would actually favour such a thing and promote such a thing in Parliament".

Then after they fail at that, what do the Conservatives do? They vote for it. If that is not contempt for what we are supposed to be doing in this place, what is? It is called a lie. If members stand in this place and vote for something, should they not actually have the guts to stand with it all the way?

Now, all of sudden, we hear from the parliamentary secretary and few others. I can see I have a few tempers flaring here, because the Conservatives do not like being caught. A few of their senators do not like getting caught either, but that is another story.

If members are going to stand in this place and vote to enact legislative mechanisms to protect passenger rights, why would they not do it? The government actually tried to suggest that it was going to do that.

• (1745)

Right before the 2008 election campaign, the government created Flight Rights Canada. The Conservatives took a flight all right. They flew as fast as they could from what they did earlier in the spring of 2008, and they created this voluntary mechanism called Flight Rights Canada. Flight Rights Canada was a totally voluntary mechanism. The Government of Canada spent a total of \$6,000 promoting it. It was supposed to be an omnibus way of protecting airline passengers. A fancy press release was put out 48 hours before the government dropped the writ for the 2008 election campaign, just to clear the issue off the books so that it could say it was doing something. Nobody ever heard of Flight Rights Canada ever again.

Since then, the government has been suggesting that it is on board with protecting airline passengers. It also started the narrative that it was not necessary, that the market would do its job, and that people are not held prisoners.

Perhaps a person pays \$1000 for an airline ticket and walks into the secure area of the airport. The airline has that passenger's bags in the hold of the aircraft, and suddenly, the flight is cancelled. Apparently a passenger has market power at that point in time and can simply walk over to another airline desk and say, "I have paid \$1000 to that airline. My bags are in the hold of that aircraft, but I would like to use my market power to fly on your airline". Is that going to happen?

The government denied and denied. It said that these rights were already available to passengers. The Canadian Transportation Agency did not see it that way. As a result of a complaint filed in 2009 against the domestic and international operations of WestJet, Air Canada and Air Transat, the Canadian Transportation Agency ruled, on June 28, 2012, that the consumer protection of airline passengers on those three airlines was inadequate and unreasonable, and it made amendments. The agency forced those three Canadian-based airlines to change their published tariffs. It forced them to improve their protections, their promises and their enactment of their promises to airline passengers. This happened while the government was saying that this was absolutely unnecessary. The Canadian Transportation Agency, a quasi-judicial body, did not quite see it that way.

Private Members' Business

We have an opportunity now to stand in this place and say as we mean and mean as we say. There are times when the market does not necessarily always protect consumers. I would hope that people on the other side would agree with that. I can think of one case in particular. A passenger walks into the airport, gets a boarding pass at the counter, gives the luggage to the airline, walks past security and finds out that after spending \$1,000 on a ticket, the flight is delayed for 24 hours because it cannot get personnel, the plane has mechanical problems, or whatever. It happens. Is that a realistic scenario that suggests to anyone that the market is going to fix the problem? Can a passenger simply walk over to another airline counter, pay \$2,000 now, because it is a last-minute ticket, retrieve that luggage from the previous flight, and carry on?

When passengers are dependent on the airline, the airline has a duty of care to the passengers. If the passengers are incapable of adjusting the circumstance to beat that reality, can the market fix the circumstance? No, it cannot, and that is why an airline passenger bill of rights is not a bad idea.

• (1750)

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to rise today in support of Bill C-459, introduced by my colleague from Laval, which would create the air passengers' bill of rights.

The aim of the bill is simple. It is fair and will protect consumers. In short, air travellers deserve to have clear rules around compensation and reimbursement when their travel plans change without two weeks notice. The bill would do just that.

The bill addresses five situations that may affect air passengers and provides details of how consumers will be compensated in those situations.

First, when a flight is cancelled, passengers would have the right to choose between being reimbursed and being rerouted to their final destination. They would also have the right to meals in a reasonable relation to the waiting time, as well as accommodation if necessary. They would be entitled to between \$250 and \$600 in compensation, depending on the situation unless the flight was cancelled due to extraordinary circumstances or if they agreed to be rerouted.

Second, if a passenger was denied boarding because of the air carrier overbooking the flight, the passenger would be entitled to receive between \$250 and \$600 in compensation in addition to any benefits offered by the airline.

Third, if a flight were to be delayed, every passenger would be entitled to meals and refreshments in a reasonable relation to the waiting time and to accommodation when necessary.

Fourth, if a passenger's bag was lost, and this happens quite often unfortunately, the passenger would be entitled to \$500 in compensation.

Finally, if passed, the bill will require airlines to include all costs to the carrier of providing the service, as well as fees, charges and taxes it collects on behalf of another person or business and would apply administrative penalties to air carriers who did not comply with this requirement.

How would this work in practice? I will use two examples.

The first example is someone is booked to go on a vacation to the Caribbean. I know that might be hard to imagine, especially when the weather networks right now are talking about all the snow that Ontario will receive. When that person arrives at the airport, he or she is informed that the carrier has now overbooked the flight. To try and solve the problem, the airline asks all passengers if any of them are willing to take another flight in return for a reduction on the ticket price that they have already paid. Since not enough travellers are willing to change their flights, our vacationer is denied boarding.

If the bill were passed, our traveller will receive an amount of \$250 to \$600 in compensation, depending on the length of the trip, as well as either being rerouted to his or her destination or having the full cost of the flight reimbursed.

In the second situation a traveller's flight is cancelled and he or she is stuck at the airport, while waiting for the next flight to arrive. After several hours of waiting at the airport, the airline then informs the passenger that his or her flight would not be available until the following day. In this case, the "right to care" set out in Bill C-459 means that if the bill were to become law, the air carrier will be required to offer meals and refreshments, accommodation, transportation between the airport and the place of accommodation and a total of two telephone calls, faxes or emails per passenger.

Our aim is not to vilify or punish air carriers. Many air carriers already have very good compensation policies and customer service.

I found myself stuck in Winnipeg a couple of weeks ago when it was so cold. The main cabin door was frozen and could not be shut. We had very good customer service and the carrier looked after all of the passengers on that flight.

There is no consistency across the industry. We need that type of consistency to protect consumers, small businesses and business travellers. The bill would create that consistency.

A similar system has been in place in the European Union since 2004, where the common rules for the compensation of air passengers in these situations was put in place across the EU member states.

• (1755)

All that the bill would do is build on the success achieved in Europe by identifying the best practices that have been put in place across the Atlantic and implement them here in Canada.

These are simple rules that would protect consumers. For this reason, I am very upset by the suggestion we hear from the other side of the House that Conservative MPs will not be supporting the bill. When the NDP has questioned the government as to whether it will support the bill, it has attempted to deflect by focusing on weather difficulties or extraordinary circumstances as a way to avoid supporting the bill.

Private Members' Business

I would, therefore, like it on the record right now that Bill C-459 explicitly states that air carriers would not be required to offer compensation for such circumstances; specifically, paragraph 4(1) (c), and subsections 4(2) and 4(3) of the bill cover this exemption. If the Conservatives focus on imagined problems as a reason to not support the bill, it is clear that they therefore do not properly understand the legislation in front of them today or that they are looking to find excuses not to support it.

In conclusion, it is clear that ensuring that consumers are protected in one of those five situations outlined in the bill is a relatively easy way for the government to improve upon the rather lacking federal consumer protection regime. For that reason, I ask all members from all parties to support this initiative and to support the bill.

● (1800)

Mr. Larry Miller (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for giving me the opportunity to address the House regarding Bill C-459, the air passengers' bill of rights, which would establish terms and conditions including compensation and rerouting for the treatment of air passengers under various circumstances when air travel is cancelled, delayed, or baggage is misplaced.

This is a big country and as a result Canadians travel more by air than most people elsewhere. Many of us have experienced situations where our flight was delayed or cancelled due to weather conditions, mechanical issues or other reasons that we may not understand. Occasionally the delivery of luggage may be delayed due to tight connections, mishandling, malfunctions and various human factors. That is the key part.

People make mistakes every now and then. We do not like them, but they are a fact of life. Sometimes as passengers we feel we have not been treated fairly. We all find these situations frustrating. I have been there and I am sure all members have. One thing should be noted though. We are fortunate that in Canada there is a mechanism that provides passengers with a means to address these situations efficiently without engaging in onerous or costly legal wrangling.

Consumers have the right to expect to be treated fairly by airlines and therefore a process is in place for the impartial investigation of concerns. In particular, this means that a passenger, who has been inconvenienced and feels that his or her concerns have not been addressed adequately by the airline, can choose to file a formal complaint with the Canadian Transportation Agency. The agency is an independent, quasi-judicial tribunal that has a mandate to review unresolved consumer complaints against air carriers and to assist consumers to the extent possible.

Please allow me now to describe the regime that exists in Canada for the protection of air passengers' rights. As I have noted, Canada's policy for airline passenger consumer protection is based on a complaints-driven process. The carriers are expected to comply with their terms and conditions of carriage, which must be made readily available to the passenger. The terms and conditions of carriage are set out in carriers' policies with respect to important consumer protection matters including, but not restricted to, acceptance, loss and damage of baggage, taxes and fees, reimbursement, claims, flight cancellations, et cetera.

Air carriers are required to publish their terms and conditions of carriage on their websites and to live by these terms and conditions. This is enshrined in legislation through specific provisions in the Canada Transportation Act. If a passenger feels that a carrier is not respecting its terms and conditions of carriage, he or she should begin by bringing a complaint first to the airline. As I mentioned earlier, if not satisfied with the airline's response, passengers may then take their complaint to the Canadian Transportation Agency, which is empowered to provide recourse.

In 2007, our government took action to strengthen Canada's consumer protection regime for air travellers by introducing measures as part of Bill C-11, An Act to amend the Canada Transportation Act and the Railway Safety Act, which improved the transparency of carriers' terms and conditions of carriage and made the complaints process under the Canadian Transportation Agency permanent.

During the same period, our government introduced Flight Rights Canada, an initiative to inform the travelling public of the consumer protection approach that we have in place in Canada, their rights under this approach and how they can seek redress if something goes wrong when they are travelling by air. Flight Rights Canada included a six-point, plain language code of conduct defining service standards.

Canada's largest airlines have adopted these standards into their terms and conditions of carriage. They are now accountable for them as they are for all their terms and conditions of carriage. As my colleagues have no doubt noticed, Bill C-459 also includes provisions that regulate full fare advertising. On this issue, I am pleased to remind hon. members that this government has already taken action with the recently announced all-inclusive airfare advertising regulations.

● (1805)

On December 14, 2012, new air services price advertising regulations came into force that required any person who advertised the price of an air service to display the total price, inclusive of all taxes, fees and charges when selling flights within or originating in Canada. That is something I have experienced. Individuals book a flight, they think they have a price and all of a sudden all the other little things get added to it and it is not what they thought it was at the start. That is no more, thanks to this government.

The two key objectives of this new regulation are to enable consumers to readily determine the total price of an advertised air service and to promote fair competition between all advertisers in the air travel industry. When Canadians are travelling by air, they expect to be treated fairly by their carrier, as well as to be able to readily determine the full price of the air services they are purchasing.

Private Members' Business

Hon. colleagues must consider this private member's bill with prudence, as we cannot overturn the current policy by implementing a prescriptive and more burdensome framework. The bill could result in consumers having to take their cases to court in certain situations, as well as changes to the mandate of the Canadian Transportation Agency. It could translate into more red tape and costs to the taxpayer. That is the last thing we need.

Furthermore, elements of the bill could potentially have significant financial implications for airlines, which would translate into higher costs for travellers. This is not what we want. For example, while the bill recognizes that airlines should not be held responsible for incidents that are caused by third parties, such as air navigation service providers or airports, the onus could be on the carriers to prove that this is the case in a submission to the Canadian Transportation Agency.

Similarly, under the bill, carriers would not be responsible for cancellations caused by weather, which is a major factor in our country. However, again, they could be placed in a situation where they would have to prove this by way of submissions to the agency. All of this would result in additional work and cost for both the airline and the agency. I need not remind members that higher costs to carriers would definitely translate into higher fares for air travel.

Let me underscore that this government is, as always, firmly committed to promoting a healthy Canadian air industry, without compromising the protection of the rights of Canadians. We have a robust system for protecting air passengers' rights and this government is proud to reiterate that it has taken steps to reinforce this and will continue to do so.

We do not have a perfect system, but it is a pretty good one. The bill would definitely make it worse, not better.

[*Translation*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Resuming debate.

The hon. member for Québec has seven minutes.

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as the deputy critic for consumer protection, I am very pleased to speak today about Bill C-459, which was introduced by the hon. member for Laval.

The Air Passengers' Bill of Rights proposes implementing a new regulation that will better protect the rights of air passengers when they are treated unfairly by airlines. In fact, Bill C-459 could protect Canadians from the time they purchase their plane ticket until they arrive at their destination.

To quickly summarize the provisions of Bill C-459, the new regulation would require air carriers to compensate passengers if their flight has been overbooked or delayed for a long time or if their luggage is lost. This bill is based on a European law that greatly reduces delays and problems with overbooking. The Air Passengers' Bill of Rights applies to all air carriers, including Canadian carriers that land on European soil. Why should Canadians be treated better in Europe than they are at home?

I have heard many stories about airline employees who bend over backwards to help passengers when their flights are delayed or cancelled, and I would even like to personally thank a number of

Canadian airline companies for the outstanding service they provide every time I travel. Unfortunately, passengers continue to be the victims of the poor practices of certain air carriers.

Many of these stories are well known. Someone buys a plane ticket and, upon their arrival at the airport, they find out that their flight has been overbooked and that, unfortunately, it is already full. That person must then wait for hours for the next flight. Or, without any explanation, passengers are forced to wait for hours before they are able to board the plane and, because of that delay, they miss their connecting flights. Other passengers have boarded the plane, only to wait for an hour or longer without anything to eat or drink before the plane takes off. These situations are unacceptable, and it is time to change the regulations in order to ensure that passengers' patience is not pushed beyond the limit unnecessarily.

Last December, the NDP questioned the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities to find out whether the government would agree to a law regarding the rights of air passengers. The minister's response focused on aspects that are beyond air carriers' control. This is what he said:

...it is nice to hear that the NDP has a solution for snowstorms, ice storms and all other unforeseen circumstances at airports.

I think that the Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities should take the time to carefully read Bill C-459. The minister is implying that the problem with this bill is that it makes airlines responsible for weather-related cancellations and delays. He will be happy to hear that this bill copies verbatim the exemption included in European legislation that exonerates airlines in extraordinary circumstances. This exemption has been used successfully in Europe for many years.

The Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities implied that Bill C-459 would make airlines responsible for weather-related cancellations and delays, but that is untrue. Nothing could be further from the truth. Bill C-459 does not require airlines to compensate passengers whose flights are delayed or cancelled because of the weather. A flight that was cancelled because of the weather is considered an extraordinary circumstance, and as I already explained, this is set out in the bill introduced by my colleague from Laval. He wisely thought of everything.

Adjournment Proceedings

The European Union commissioned a study two years after it implemented its legislation. I am sure my colleagues on the other side would love to hear the results of this study. The study concluded that European airlines extensively used the extraordinary circumstances argument to avoid compensating passengers. However, all of the stakeholders agreed that the extraordinary circumstances exemption nevertheless struck a good balance between a passenger's right to compensation and fairness to the airlines.

• (1810)

Under Bill C-459, all that an air carrier is required to do in a case of cancellation due to weather is: reimburse or reroute each passenger, which is reasonable; offer meals and refreshments in relation to the waiting time, nothing wrong with that; and provide hotel accommodation in cases where a stay of one or more nights is required. There is nothing here that is unreasonable for an air carrier to do.

That said, it is important to recognize that many airlines already offer passengers good compensation. The purpose of this bill is not to attack the airlines, but rather to level the playing field for carriers and penalize only those companies that try to fleece customers in order to increase their profits. That is the difference.

Companies that follow the regulations will not have to pay. However, those that make a profit at the expense of passengers will have to compensate travellers for their mismanagement. It is as simple as that.

Why should customers not expect better service? Why should passengers not be informed of flight changes, delays and cancellations under penalty to the airlines? Why should the new rules not be posted at the airline counter to inform customers of their rights and the process to file for compensation? Why should the public not expect all-in-one pricing so they know the total cost of the flight before they click the "buy" button?

These are simple, obvious measures. There is no doubt that this is a good bill. I invite all of my colleagues in the House to vote in favour of Bill C-459.

• (1815)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time provided for consideration of private members' business has now expired, and the order is dropped to the bottom of the order of precedence on the order paper.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

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

[*Translation*]

VETERANS

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this adjournment debate this evening relates to a question I put to the Minister of Veterans Affairs on October 25 and to which I did not get any response.

To give a bit of context, at the time I said that the government, through the funeral and burial program, was providing only \$3,600 to cover the funeral expenses incurred by a veteran in need, while the actual cost of a decent funeral is at least \$7,000, if not \$8,000.

In the days that followed, specifically on November 5 and 6, several of my colleagues put questions to the minister but did not get any response.

We asked why, since taking office, the government had not increased funding for funeral and burial costs for our veterans, despite being aware of this issue since 2009.

Of course, the minister gave a stock reply that did not at all answer the question. The only answer provided was that he would not cut into the veterans' programs, like the Liberals had done before. Of course, that was not my question. I did not ask whether he would make cuts to the programs, but whether he was going to increase funding for this funeral and burial program.

So, I hope to get that answer today. I am looking forward to hearing the parliamentary secretary tell us whether the government intends to increase funding for this funeral program in the 2013 budget or, at the very least, during the review of the new veterans charter.

I also think it is important that the minister and the parliamentary secretary take a closer look at the Patrick Stogran report, which was tabled in February 2009 and which focused precisely on this funeral fund program. What have they done since? Absolutely nothing.

In his report entitled "Serve with Honour, Depart with Dignity", the veterans ombudsman, Patrick Stogran, mentioned seven major concerns. Among other things, he feels that the funding is lower than the costs, that the program has too much red tape and that it should be offered to all veterans, and not just to a single class of the poorest veterans.

In its study on the commemoration of the 21st century, the committee made the same recommendation, namely that the program be improved. At the time, before October 25, the Funeral Service Association of Canada sounded the alarm. It confirmed that funding for the program was well below funeral costs. That funding has not been adjusted since 2001, while costs have increased significantly since.

The association even said that its members provide funeral services at a lower cost to veterans than to the general public. Those businesses are partially funding funerals for deceased veterans because they feel it is important that veterans have a burial that is worthy of their sacrifice. I thank them for their commitment to our veterans. We are asking the government to have the same level of commitment and to improve the program to cover all funeral costs, as it should.

Eligibility also seems to be an issue. Since 2006, 67% of requests have been denied. That is an alarming percentage, and it is high time the government review its eligibility criteria. All veterans should have access to this program, no matter where and when they served. The ombudsman and the NDP feel that there should not be different classes of veterans; they should all be equal.

Adjournment Proceedings

Using the estate or means test to assess the net worth of a veteran's estate also seems to be problematic because it restricts a veteran's access to the program. The Royal Canadian Legion stated that the government had effectively limited the ability of the Last Post Fund to meet its mandate by reducing the estate exemption from \$24,000 to \$12,000. That happened under the Liberal government, but the Conservative government has done nothing to change the situation since 2006.

I will ask the government again. Will it make improvements to this program in the 2013 budget, and will it change the eligibility criteria for the program?

• (1820)

[*English*]

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for his question because it allows me to highlight our government's ongoing commitments to Canadian veterans and their families.

The funeral and burial program provides financial assistance to the families of all veterans in financial need who die of a service related disability. That is the sole purpose of this important program, to ensure that veterans receive a dignified funeral and burial, and it is working. In the past year alone, our government has helped the families of more than 1,300 veterans through a profoundly difficult period of their lives. Since our government took office, close to 10,000 veterans' families have benefited from the funerals and burials program.

Of course, we are always looking for ways to improve this important program and to serve Canadian veterans. We are always looking for ways to strengthen the services we provide and the many benefits that are available to our veterans.

Looking internationally, Canada can be proud of our robust funeral and burial program. Unlike many of our allies, the funeral and burial program covers the entire cost of the burial itself. Benefits available in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom all provide equal or lesser benefits to their veterans. This fact, unfortunately, gets lost in the opposition parties' spin. That truly is unfortunate.

Our track record on veterans issues is unmatched by any political party in the House and, frankly, by any previous government. We have improved or maintained benefits across the board and have done it during very challenging fiscal times. We have also improved customer service to our veterans. We have eliminated millions of individual transactions between veterans and the federal government, including by moving to a grant model for the veterans independence program, saving veterans time and money.

Finally, I will not take any lessons from the opposition, in particular from the member's party. They talk about supporting veterans, but if they had their way, veterans would lose benefits and services at an unprecedented rate. Believe it or not, the member actually voted to reduce the Veterans Affairs budget by almost \$2 million quite recently and with one swoop would have closed over 600 new sites where veterans can gain access to information on the benefits they need.

All of the initiatives that I have described represent real and meaningful action for veterans and their families. They also demonstrate how the government is always looking ahead and adapting our programs and services to meet the needs of all veterans. Canada's heroes deserve this and we are very proud to deliver.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Mr. Speaker, I listened to the parliamentary secretary's non-answer to my question. She inundated us with figures. I too can throw out numbers: 8, 12, 46, 94 and bonus number 72. These are not winning numbers in Lotto 6/49, and the numbers that the parliamentary secretary gave us are not winning numbers either. There are only losers in this case. The funeral companies lose out because they have to cover the cost of veterans' funerals when necessary.

All that the government is offering to ensure that our veterans receive a burial is \$3,600. That is hardly enough for a dignified burial.

I will ask my question again. Will the government improve the burial fund to cover the entire cost of giving our veterans a dignified burial? That is the question I would like to have answered.

• (1825)

[*English*]

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, our government has provided more than most of our allies. It is a very proud Canadian record and we are always looking to see how we might go about improving the services and benefits for our veterans.

What is truly appalling though is the record of the member's party in funding veterans. The NDP has voted against just about every service or benefit we provide to veterans. I will give a couple of quick examples. The NDP actually voted against \$35 million to increase the grants for disability awards to our veterans. It voted against funding for the education of the children of deceased veterans. Who truly votes against funding the education of the orphans of veterans? That is despicable. That is appalling. The NDP has also voted against funding cenotaphs. It voted against funding over \$1 billion for our new veterans charter. The list goes on and on.

[*Translation*]

PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Ms. Manon Perreault (Montcalm, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on October 23, I asked the President of the Treasury Board to explain the problems with the funding of the public service disability insurance plan. He did not answer my question.

He stated that the government would establish a plan for the future to support and protect the interests of public servants and to be accountable to taxpayers. In fact, nothing has been done and there is no reassurance that public servants are covered by a disability plan that is adequately funded.

Adjournment Proceedings

My question had to do specifically with the fact that barely two years after recording a \$102 million surplus, the public service disability insurance plan was posting a deficit.

Nevertheless, the President of the Treasury Board said he was standing up for public servants in this matter. However, the reason why the disability plan was suddenly in the red was because the government had stopped paying millions of dollars into the plan a few months earlier, even though claims were up. The plan is in the red because of the government's inaction.

The board of management that oversees the public service disability insurance plan had warned the government in its 2011 annual report.

An unexpected negative plan experience resulted in a \$69 million deficit. The warning was also designed to force the government to be more vigilant over the course of the following months. The government did the opposite. It stopped funding the plan as claims were increasing.

To top it off, the Treasury Board report clearly shows that the plan began declining in the last seven months of 2011. This coincided with increasing claims related to mental health issues.

The government's inaction leads us to believe that the Conservatives intend to reject claims from people with mental health issues, as well as those from other people truly in need. The government claims that it is protecting the interests of public servants. Our understanding of this issue is quite different.

If this trend continues, the plan's financial outlook will only worsen—the number of claims has gone up by nearly 13% over last year. A large part of this increase is attributable to people with mental health issues. They are entitled to compensation.

Why does the government continue to neglect those living with limitations instead of improving services for them?

The government's management of this file is dismal, and the government does not seem to want to take the situation seriously. It has not presented a credible strategy for ensuring proper funding. The plan's current funding is extremely problematic and it is people with mental illness who are paying the price.

As is the case for the vast majority of federal programs that lack planning, it is the people with chronic or episodic illness who slip between the cracks.

This is not the time for the government to stand idly by. It has a duty to help the growing number of struggling public servants get better.

There is cause for concern if the government does not put in place adequate corrective measures.

I will repeat my question: will the Conservatives ensure that this plan has proper funding?

• (1830)

[English]

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is my pleasure to rise in the House to speak to the issue of the disability insurance plan and

disability management in the public service. I would like to begin by correcting some of the statements made by my hon. colleague on these issues.

First, the disability insurance plan is not in a deficit position. It currently has a surplus of about \$100 million.

Second, the government has not stopped funding this important plan. The government continues to pay 85% of the cost of annual premiums. What has happened is that the level of the surplus has declined due to an increasing volume of claims.

We understand that other employers are experiencing similar trends at this time. We continue to work with both officials and the public service unions through a board of management established under the National Joint Council to ensure that the plan remains viable and adequately funded in a manner that balances the interests of public servants and taxpayers.

The real issue here is the need to find ways to reduce the incidents and duration of long-term disability in the federal public service and to improve workplace wellness. I am happy to report that progress in this area is already being made.

In consultation with bargaining agents under the disability management initiative, we have developed resources, tools and services for departments. These include training for disability management advisers and a web resource, which contains a manager's handbook, a manual on establishing a disability management program in departments and an employee wellness resource.

Tools have also been enhanced to provide deputy heads with more current data on the state of disability and sick leave management across the federal public service.

We have taken some positive steps forward and we are vigorously continuing our work toward finding better ways to support public service employees who are facing disability.

The Government of Canada is committed to workforce wellness and fundamentally reducing the incidents and duration of disability over the long term. The federal government offers a comprehensive package of benefits, such as health, dental and disability insurance plans, and provides for certain types of leave and other flexible work arrangements to promote workplace well-being. This increases the effectiveness and productivity of departments and agencies in achieving their program objectives.

Through the disability management initiative, we have made improvements to the current system that we believe would help reduce the incidents and duration of disability. We are continuing our efforts to find the best possible solutions to deal with these issues.

We look forward to working with stakeholders to make further progress in the future.

Adjournment Proceedings

[Translation]

Ms. Manon Perreault: Mr. Speaker, of course I would be delighted to forward the source of the figures I gave earlier. You will see that they are accurate.

When we look at the government's record regarding disability issues, we see just how inadequate the programs are. The government's refusal to provide adequate funding for the public service disability insurance plan is unfortunately part of this appalling trend.

The government must understand that it needs to fulfill its commitments to persons with disabilities through fair and balanced programs. Otherwise, the government's commitment is worthless and the programs in place will not meet the objectives that were set.

So, instead of ending funding to the public service disability insurance plan, which would explain why it is in a deficit position right now, the government must take action. The number of compensation claims is on the rise, and now is not the time to abandon these people in need, many of whom also have mental health problems.

What does the government plan to do about this? Will the Conservatives provide adequate funding for the plan?

[English]

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, I would like to reiterate that the disability insurance plan has a surplus of about \$100 million. Moreover, the government continues to fund this important plan.

We are proud of the work the public service does every day to serve Canadians. Canada's public service employs the best and the brightest people, whose work is intimately tied to the well-being of our nation.

Our government is committed to the well-being of the men and women of the public service. Within our first year, the Prime Minister established an advisory committee of eminent Canadians to advise him on the renewal and future development of the Public Service of Canada. Many of their recommendations have led directly to tangible actions and real results across the public service.

We look forward to building on this good work to enable the public service today and in the years ahead.

• (1835)

[Translation]

HOUSING

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before Christmas, Food Banks Canada reported that reliance on food aid had reached an all-time high in Canada.

The report also indicated that government measures to increase the number of affordable housing units were the primary solution to this problem. I said at the time to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development that there was no such commitment in her government's most recent budget.

When we ask questions on this issue, we are told that the government has invested over \$2 billion in affordable housing through its economic action plan, and so on. According to the

Conservatives' talking points, the government helps 755,000 Canadian households every year. The problem is that the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada reports that some 3 million Canadian households, including 750,000 children, are in core housing need.

The government does not seem to understand that it will take more than just funding to solve the housing crisis in Canada. We need a long-term plan that includes programs to end homelessness and to ensure that all Canadians have a roof over their heads. Canada needs a national strategy. We are the only G8 country that does not have a housing strategy.

With 3 million Canadian households living in housing insecurity, it is obvious that Canada has fallen behind when it comes to investments in affordable housing. Of all the developed countries, Canada has one of the least developed social housing sectors, and fewer and fewer Canadians can become homeowners.

In May of last year, this House unanimously adopted Motion No. 331 introduced by the hon. member for Shefford. This motion confirmed that the federal government has international obligations respecting the right to housing under the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The motion also recognized the duty to support efforts by Canadian municipalities to combat homelessness. Bill C-400 is a logical extension of these efforts.

Canada will undergo its second universal periodic review by the UN Human Rights Council in 2013. It will have to report to civil society organizations and member countries of the United Nations human resources committee on its accomplishments in the area of housing.

A number of groups think that the conclusions of the UN special rapporteur will be worse than those in the 2009 review. At that time, the special rapporteur criticized this government's inaction in dealing with the crisis, which is getting worse. This shows the importance of a housing strategy, which is supported by hundreds of organizations.

Can the parliamentary secretary explain to me why the government refuses to discuss such a strategy when it would greatly improve the situation?

[English]

Ms. Eve Adams (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member again asked about a national housing strategy for Canada. The hon. member clearly believes that the federal government should be telling the provinces and the territories what they should be doing, and we on this side of the House simply do not agree.

Our government has invested unprecedented amounts in a multi-pronged approach that respects provincial jurisdiction in housing to ensure that Canadians have access to affordable, sound and suitable housing.

Adjournment Proceedings

Our approach works, because governments at all levels recognize that housing needs differ across the country. Local challenges need local solutions and we all recognize that provinces and territories are best positioned to design and deliver programs to address housing needs in their jurisdictions.

By not recognizing that social housing is largely a provincial jurisdiction and moving away from the local delivery of social housing programming, this approach could lead to more bureaucracy and, as a result, most costly social housing.

Our approach is collaborative. We engage with the full spectrum of housing stakeholders and we respect provincial, territorial and on-reserve jurisdictions. That is why we do not support Bill C-400.

Rather than being a solution to housing challenges across Canada, we believe that a prescriptive, national approach would slow progress, cause unnecessary friction between governments and actually impede the development of effective local solutions.

That is why, instead of holding meetings and developing discussion papers, we have opted for action. We worked closely with the provinces and territories to deliver more than \$2 billion in social housing investments under Canada's economic action plan, and Mississauga—Brampton South, my community, certainly benefited from that important investment.

As reported earlier this year, this funding was supported an estimated 16,500 social housing units and first nations housing units across the country. It was delivered quickly and effectively, thanks to collaboration between all stakeholders. Tens of thousands of Canadians have benefited as a result.

In fact, our government is already investing more in affordable and supportive housing than any other government in Canadian history. Last year we announced a new investment in the affordable housing framework with the provinces and territories to guide the delivery of federal housing investments through to 2014. This framework provides for combined federal-provincial-territorial spending of \$1.4 billion over three years.

Provinces and territories are responsible for program design, delivery and administration and they have the flexibility to invest in a range of solutions to improve the living conditions of Canadians in need.

Since 2006, our government has invested an estimated \$13.1 billion in housing and homelessness programs. During this period, we have witnessed a tremendous level of co-operation between governments and other housing stakeholders, in fact, a truly national collaboration.

This is not the time to interrupt progress by shifting our attention to holding meetings rather than implementing actual housing solutions.

● (1840)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Claude Morin: Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to tell the hon. member that Bill C-400 is not just about holding meetings. A national strategy is also about taking action.

Housing is not just a provincial responsibility. It is a shared responsibility. The federal government has responsibilities when it comes to housing. It must make appropriate investments and work with the provinces. Working with the provinces means talking with them, consulting them. When I talk about the provinces, I am also referring to the territories, of course. Talking with the provinces means consulting with them, being open and listening to their needs. However, this does not seem to be what the government is doing right now with regard to housing in Canada.

The housing crisis is a growing problem. I would like to provide another statistic. Right now, in Canada, between 150,000 and 300,000 people are homeless. It is not normal for a so-called rich country such as Canada to see families in core housing need and people living in the streets—

[*English*]

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Ms. Eve Adams: Mr. Speaker, I certainly understand the hon. member's concern for those who require assisted housing, but as I have already said, the current approach our government has is working.

Since 2006, we have created 46,000 new affordable housing units and we have renovated more than 100,000. Every year our government is providing support for more than 605,000 individuals and families with subsidized housing needs.

Since 2006, more than 8,900 new rental units have been committed under the on-reserve non-profit housing program. In addition, under Canada's economic action plan, more than 10,000 new units were created on and off reserve.

These projects not only improved living conditions for tens of thousands of Canadians, but they also put people to work quickly and stimulated local economies.

This year alone we will spend close to \$2 billion through a range of programs to help Canadians with housing needs. We continue to build on the progress that has been achieved to date.

● (1845)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:45 p.m.)

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