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(HANSARD)

Tuesday, April 16, 2013



Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday, April 16, 2013

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

•(1005)

[*English*]

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PETITIONS

Mr. Tom Lukiwski (Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 36(8), I have the honour to table, in both official languages, the government's responses to 16 petitions.

* * *

2013 BOSTON MARATHON

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there have been consultations among the parties and if you seek it I believe you will find unanimous consent for the following motion. I move:

That this House condemn the attacks perpetrated during the 2013 Boston Marathon and express its deepest sympathies to the victims of this senseless violence and to their families.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

(Motion agreed to)

* * *

PETITIONS

INTERNATIONAL AID

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to table a petition in the House today on behalf of dozens of members from my community of Hamilton Mountain on CIDA's role in funding Canadian private sector extractive projects and financial support for the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace.

The petitioners are profoundly concerned about the government's new direction with respect to CIDA, including the latest changes in budget 2013, and they call upon Parliament to adopt the following policy goals: first, to explore innovative solutions to development challenges that would respect the Canadian Official Development Assistance Accountability Act; second, to prioritize CIDA funding to experienced NGOs that Canadians support and which have seen their funding cut; and third, to demonstrate international responsibility by recommitting Canada to contribute .7% of GDP to official development assistance.

GENETICALLY MODIFIED ALFALFA

Mr. David Wilks (Kootenay—Columbia, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise on behalf of hundreds of people from Alberta asking that Parliament impose a moratorium on the release of genetically modified alfalfa in order to allow proper review of the impact on farmers in Canada.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I have two petitions to present this morning.

[*Translation*]

The first petition has to do with oil tankers off the coast of British Columbia.

[*English*]

The petitioners are from the Vancouver area and they call upon the House of Commons to place a permanent moratorium on the transit of oil tankers through the waters of northern British Columbia as has been protected through a moratorium federally and provincially since 1972.

41ST GENERAL ELECTION

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition comes from residents primarily of the Tofino and North Vancouver areas.

The petitioners call upon the House of Commons to ask the Prime Minister to create a royal commission into the robocalls that occurred during the 2011 federal election campaign.

* * *

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?

Business of Supply

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKER PROGRAM

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.) moved:

That the House recognize that the use of temporary foreign workers to replace Canadian workers in jobs Canadians are qualified and able to do is an abuse of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, and that it is the government's responsibility to ensure that this program is not abused in a way which threatens the wellbeing of Canadian workers and the Canadian economy; that a special committee be appointed, with a mandate to conduct hearings on this critical issue, to hear from Canadians affected by this practice, and to propose solutions to strengthen the rules around the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to prevent abuse; that the committee consist of 12 members which shall include seven members from the government party, four members from the Official Opposition and one member from the Liberal Party, provided that the Chair is from the government party; that in addition to the Chair, there be one Vice-Chair from each of the opposition parties; that the committee have all of the powers of a Standing Committee as provided in the Standing Orders, as well as the power to travel, accompanied by the necessary staff, inside and outside of Canada, subject to the usual authorization from the House; that the members to serve on the said committee be appointed by the Whip of each party depositing with the Clerk of the House a list of his or her party's members of the committee no later than April 26, 2013; that the quorum of the special committee be seven members for any proceedings, provided that at least a member of the opposition and of the government party be present; that membership substitutions be permitted to be made from time to time, if required, in the manner provided for in Standing Order 114(2); and that the committee report its recommendations to the House no later than June 19, 2013.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased today to bring forward this motion on behalf of the Liberal Party. I thank my colleague, the member for Vancouver Centre for seconding the motion.

Most Canadians, if they had never been aware of the temporary foreign worker program, have certainly become aware of it in recent months. It is important that the issues around the program are given a fair and open airing. Moving forward, many aspects of the program can be addressed and fixed.

It is important to note that the program was brought forward by a Liberal government decades ago to address a particular problem within the Canadian workforce. What the government at the time tried to do was to set out a careful balance between protecting the jobs and wages of Canadian workers and protecting Canadians' access to employment opportunities first and foremost. Also, the intent was to assist businesses and corporations that have legitimate difficulty in finding workers. The third part of that balance was protecting the dignity of temporary foreign workers by ensuring they are paid a fair wage and are treated as fairly as Canadian workers doing that same job.

What we have seen over the last number of years, and what I hope to bring forward in my comments today, is that balance has been knocked out of sync. It has been destroyed. The government has skewed the system to favour the employer only, removing important protections for Canadian workers and treating temporary foreign workers unfairly. That is what has raised the ire of many Canadians from coast to coast to coast. That is what has raised concerns around the program. Hopefully, through supporting and adopting the motion, a committee of this chamber will be able to look into those

many issues and aspects and we can get this program back on the rails.

What we have seen happen over the last number of months, and even the last couple of years, is that Canadians are starting to lose confidence. It is not only in this particular program. We have seen interventions made by the government that have caused Canadians to lose confidence in some of these government programs, whether by design, if it is purposeful on the part of the government, bad management, or just a bad idea. However, once we lose that public confidence, once it is breached, Canadians get hurt. When the confidence is shaken in that particular program, Canadian employers, employees, and certainly those who wish to become Canadian employees, all lose.

How surprised would the public be to know almost one in every seven jobs created by the Conservative Party is filled by a temporary foreign worker? That is a fairly significant number. How can this be, when we have almost a million and a half Canadians who are unemployed in our country? That is the question everyone has been asking, but the government has not been able to answer.

If the RBC controversy last week was the straw that broke the camel's back on the Conservative government's temporary foreign worker program, then maybe that is a good thing that it brought it to light.

We have seen this play out before. Last fall we saw the debacle of the HD Mining situation in B.C. where Canadian miners were not allowed the opportunity to gain those mining jobs because they were not able to speak Mandarin. Therefore, we saw the approval of an influx of Chinese miners to take these particular jobs.

● (1010)

When that happens we know there is something wrong with the system and it has to be evaluated.

The alarm bells were ringing on this program far before that. In 2009, the Auditor General issued a damning report, in part about the temporary foreign worker program.

With each controversy, the government's response has consistently been that it is concerned. When the Conservatives knocked the wheels off the employment insurance program, the government was very concerned and was taking it seriously. When anything goes wrong it is very concerned. It does not motivate the government to do anything about it, but it is very concerned.

We are not getting any action. Rather, we are getting a bucketful of concern. It has gone past the concern stage.

I know Canadians are concerned. When they see that the program has exploded by over 200,000 temporary foreign workers in the last six years they should be concerned. When the current government took over, there were 140,000 temporary foreign workers. Currently, there are about 340,000.

Every time this controversy swirls around this program the other response is that it is under review. We have never seen a review or the results of a review, but it is under review because the government is concerned. The government's words have long since become hollow and meaningless.

Business of Supply

The Liberal Party realizes that this issue is too important to Canadian workers, Canadian business, and the foreign workers who themselves have to rely on the government's empty promises of reviews and reforms.

This program once had a legitimate role in helping employers deal with acute labour shortages. However, through government mismanagement, the program has gone off the rails and now needs to be fixed. That is why I moved this motion today and why we are debating it.

It makes no sense to have foreign workers increasing while the ranks of the unemployed are growing. Seven years ago in Toronto there were 20,000 temporary foreign workers. The unemployment rate was 7.2%. Now there are over 60,000 temporary foreign workers and the unemployment rate is 8.8% or 8.9%. The math makes no sense. Only a committee of Parliament can conduct an open and transparent review of the program to restore confidence that it is working in the best interests of not only business but workers, temporary foreign workers, and society as a whole.

How did we get in this mess? The Conservatives have allowed the TFW program to go from helping employers with short-term labour needs to one that is quickly becoming a permanent pool of submissive, low-cost replacement workers. That is what they have developed for the country. In the process, they are creating employer dependency on the program and robbing Canadians of work opportunities, especially those Canadians who are underemployed, those sectors such as aboriginal people, young people, and persons with disabilities. These people are being further disadvantaged by the creation of this large pool of temporary foreign workers.

The government loves to brag about the number of net new jobs it has created since the end of the recession. However, the dirty little secret about who is filling those jobs has not yet been told. As I said at the start of my speech, one in seven jobs created by the party since it took office in 2006 has been filled by a temporary worker. The number is unbelievable. It has increased by almost a quarter of a million under the Conservative rule.

Last week the RBC controversy symbolized what is wrong with the program. The rules have become so loose that an outsourcing company received permission to bring in foreign workers to help a Canadian company outsource high-paying, high-skilled jobs to India and then have the Canadian workers train those individuals. For an application like that to get through, either the checks and balances are not there or they were disregarded. It is one or the other.

• (1015)

Over three years ago the Auditor General delivered a damning report on the TFW program, saying it was not run efficiently or effectively and that it was not only failing Canadians but failing foreign workers as well. The government paid lip service to the AG's report and implemented some changes that did nothing to solve the problems then or to solve the problems we are seeing today. The government has repeatedly failed to take responsibility for the problems within this program. Each time a controversy arises, it is review and concern, but whatever changes the government makes, the problems seem to get worse, not better.

The Conservatives say the program is only used as a measure of last resort to help employers with short-term needs, when all the facts show just the opposite.

According to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, as late as last fall, she said, "The program is working well." She thought everything was rosy. She thought everything was going along as normal. Well, when a company is allowed to hire 200 Chinese miners in B.C. because they cannot find Canadian workers who speak Mandarin, there is something wrong with the program. When we have to allow the breadth of the program and the number of foreign workers to expand when the unemployment rate for Canadians has risen, the program is not working.

I will pose a few questions to try to understand the mess the government has created with this program.

How did this happen? That is the first one we should address. How do we go from 140,000 TFWs in 2006 when the unemployment rate was 6.3% to 340,000 temporary foreign workers when the unemployment rate is 7.6%?

The answer can be traced directly to the misguided policy changes the Conservatives have made through their mismanagement of the program. They increased the number of eligible low-skilled occupations in the program. They fast-tracked applications for certain regions and accelerated the approval process to 10 days for many employers. In addition, they allowed employers to pay temporary foreign workers 15% less than the prevailing Canadian wage rate. They did all this without putting in place the proper checks and balances to ensure the program would not be abused. That is a recipe for disaster.

It is quite telling about the government's priorities and beliefs when we compare how it reformed the temporary foreign worker program with how it reformed the EI insurance program. The contrast is stark. On one hand, the government based its EI reforms around the fundamental belief that EI recipients are lazy and looking for ways to cheat the system. There are new measures that are based on this belief, including forcing people to accept jobs outside their skill range and expertise at up to a 30% pay cut.

The Conservatives now think it is fair and reasonable to send fraud inspectors unannounced to people's homes to investigate them when there is no suspicion of wrongdoing. To add insult to injury, they are cutting EI processing staff, which has caused EI processing times to be the worst since the government took office. It is now routinely taking five and six weeks to get a cheque to an unemployed Canadian.

Business of Supply

The contrast is stark. Let us compare this to the changes the Conservatives made in the TFW program. They have loosened the rules in this program, including fast-tracking applications and last year's change that accelerated processing to 10 days for employers. They have allowed employers to pay less, not more, and finally, assuming employers would not abuse the system, taking their word on many applications that they could not hire local employees, that they could not hire unemployed Canadians. They have taken their word on that. That is certainly in stark contrast to the changes they have made in the EI system.

My second question is this: why did this happen?

The government has defended allowing, even encouraging, the explosion of TFWs because of the skills and labour shortage. That is the Conservatives' usual refrain. They have expanded and broadened the temporary foreign worker program as a solution to the skills shortage at the expense of building a sustainable, long-term skills plan.

• (1020)

Now the chickens are coming home to roost. When we do not develop a plan that focuses on investments to benefit employers and workers, provides accurate labour market information to help people understand where the jobs of today and tomorrow will be, increases workplace training to help employees be more productive and facilitates worker mobility to allow people to go where the jobs are and to have their credentials recognized, we end up with the problem that we have here today. It is a shame that the government has wasted seven years using short-term fixes and failed policies to try to address the long-term skills and labour shortage.

I mentioned some of the underemployed groups that have felt the effects of failed Conservative programs and misguided priorities. One of the groups that has come out a loser under the current government is the young people of our country. The government has simply failed Canada's youth. The youth unemployment rate now stands two points higher than it did seven years ago. There is actually a net loss of 50,000 youth jobs over that same period.

The government trumpets its youth employment strategy, yet it supports almost 50,000 fewer student positions now than in the last year that the Liberal government was in power. That number alone tells the story of failed policies and wrong priorities. How can the government justify that, especially when it encourages the rise of foreign workers at the same time? Put simply, the Conservatives have placed a higher priority on outsourcing Canadian jobs to foreign workers than on training our youth for the jobs of today and tomorrow.

The final question I would like to ask is this: what role should temporary foreign workers have in our skills and labour plan?

First, the program was used primarily as a last resort for employers while they found qualified people through offering higher wages, investing in training, and increasing worker productivity.

Second, without doubt certain regions of the country and specific occupations are facing real skills and labour shortages. We cannot bury our heads in the sand. We have a responsibility to fix this program for the employers who genuinely cannot find workers. We know that if it was not for temporary foreign workers in the

agricultural sector in many areas of the country, we would not have an agricultural industry. That could be said in a number of other sectors as well. Properly used, the temporary foreign worker program is an important and needed tool in helping companies deal with legitimate and critical skills and labour shortages.

However, right now we must all agree that the system is broken and that it needs fixing. The program as is cannot continue on the same path. Instead of investing in Canadian workers and companies to create a highly trained and productive workforce, the government has turned to temporary foreign workers as an easy fix, and that has failed. The list of examples of companies abusing the temporary foreign worker program to reduce long-term labour costs instead of using it to solve legitimate temporary labour shortages is growing.

It has come to light and it is at the forefront of discussion across the country now. For us to neglect it as lawmakers and parliamentarians is to do a great disservice to business and to workers in the country. We are doing our society a great disservice.

• (1025)

This is what Parliament is all about. I would hope that the parties here in the House support this motion so that we can get a full airing of the issue and have recommendations brought forward to fix this program.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, back when the party of the member opposite was in power, there was an economic downturn as well. At that time the Liberals took millions of dollars out of the EI fund to balance the books. They balanced the books on the backs of unemployed people instead of providing skills training so that we would not be in a situation of having jobs available but not having people with the proper skills to match and fill the positions.

I wonder if the member opposite would remind this House of the number of millions of dollars they took from the EI fund to make it look like they were balancing the books.

• (1030)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate my colleague giving me the opportunity to shed some light on that. I think a little history lesson would be worthwhile.

Yes, there was a surplus in the EI fund. Prior to 1993, after those years of Tory rule when the unemployment rate was at 12.5%, when inflation was in double digits, when interest rates were in double digits, we were spending \$48 billion more a year than we were bringing in, and the deficits continued to grow under Brian Mulroney. The national debt went from \$140 billion to \$540 billion under Conservative rule.

Business of Supply

In 1992, the Auditor General said that we could no longer have a stand-alone EI fund. It had to go into the general coffers because, under the Tories, that fund was bankrupt, and we are seeing a repeat of that now.

The fund was bankrupt under the Tories, but under the Liberal government, the unemployment rate was brought down to 8.5%, 7.5% and 6.2%. More people were paying into the EI fund and fewer people were drawing out of the fund, which was in general revenues. Investments went into health care, transfers to the provinces, and programs and services for Canadians.

That was back in the good old days of balanced budgets and surplus budgets. I do not know what kind of mess we are going to inherit next time, but the sooner we get rid of these guys, the less mess there will be.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I very much appreciated the comments by my colleague for Cape Breton—Canso. I do not at all question his sincerity in bringing the motion forward today.

It is true that Conservative mismanagement of our economy has led us to a place where we are now faced with high unemployment and a skills shortage, which really is something that should not be happening in our country and economy today. The temporary foreign workers program has played an important role in the past in dealing with skills and labour shortages, but the member is absolutely right that under this Conservative government, the temporary foreign workers program has been completely bungled.

I cannot imagine being in the shoes of one of the workers at RBC who was being thrown out of a job so that a temporary foreign worker could take that job at a lower wage. To add insult to injury, of course, the workers who were being thrown out of work were being asked to train the workers taking their place.

The temporary foreign workers program needs to be reviewed. It is a program that Canadians deserve action on when we have an unemployment rate that sees 1.4 million Canadians without a job. However, if the member shares this profound concern and dismay over the way the government is handling the temporary foreign workers program, why would he bring forward a motion that simply asks for the creation of yet another committee?

The committee he is asking for will be dominated, like every other committee in this House, by government members. They have the majority. How are we going to get to real action when all we are calling for is yet another committee to do more studying?

I think Canadians want real action. They want timelines. They want the government to get serious about it. They do not want more talk and, frankly, they deserve more action.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, having been able to sit with my colleague from Hamilton Mountain on the human resources, skills and social development committee for the last period of time, I can sense the frustration in her voice. In dealing with some issues in committee, some important ideas have been advanced by witnesses in some of the studies we have undertaken. There were recommendations that probably would have gone a long way, only to be defeated by the Conservative majority on that particular committee.

In answer to her question, I think we will at least get these issues out. There are good examples of employers across this country that are using this program as it was intended. They are complying not just with the rules but with the spirit of the program. What we are hearing from them anecdotally is that they would like to provide a pathway to citizenship for some of the temporary foreign workers. The reason for the motion is so that we can bring forward the employers and some of the labour groups that have concerns about the program and hear their views on these particular issues. Then they would be the public domain and we would be able to put some facts behind the particular positions the groups have taken and share them.

Hopefully the Conservatives can understand that this is a program that is broken.

We cannot simply call on the government to fix it. It said it was going to fix it in 2009 and did nothing. Last November, the minister said in the House that the government was going to review it and do something about it. It did nothing. I am awaiting a statement today saying that they are probably going to do something about it. They will voice concern and say that it will be reviewed. It is our responsibility as members of Parliament to get something done, put a back end on it and make sure that we report in June. Let us get it done and let us get it done right.

• (1035)

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I listened closely to my colleague's remarks. He certainly hit the point in terms of how the temporary foreign worker program is not working. It is severely broken right now. I support a committee of the House holding hearings, which would be an opportunity to show Canadians that Parliament can work properly. Maybe the government would, in its wisdom, allow some of the members on the back benches to actually speak out with their own voices for a change, and we could accomplish something as a committee.

There is a concern about the temporary foreign workers program. Some people attack it and say that it is taking jobs away, but in the agriculture sector, there is a real need for those temporary foreign workers. I would like to ask my colleague how we find the balance between the legitimate need for foreign workers in some industries and businesses that are clearly now using the program, condoned by the government, and the abuse of it in a way that undermines wages, labour rights, et cetera. How do we find the balance in terms of the legitimacy of the program?

Mr. Rodger Cuzner: Mr. Speaker, I have two points.

Number one, the government has shown that its main motivation and what drives any policy development is ideology.

The member has been around this chamber far longer than I have and would know that when past governments were going to make a particular change in a policy, they would create discussions around the issue, whether it was through a green paper or a white paper. They would solicit expert advice on a particular issue and develop a policy going forward. We see none of that with this particular government. It is ideologically motivated.

Business of Supply

I agree with the member. I spoke with a farmer who has brought in about 15 Jamaican farm workers for about 15 years, and those 15 farm workers support another 20 jobs within that community. It is a very successful enterprise. There are parts of this program that are very successful and should be continued, but only through a full hearing to get an understanding of the important parts and how we can not just fix it but improve it.

Ms. Kellie Leitch (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development and to the Minister of Labour, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Brampton West.

Mr. Speaker, let me be clear. Canadians will have the first crack at all available jobs. The original intent of the program was to help employers find temporary help in cases where there was an absolute, acute labour shortage.

We are concerned about the recent issues that have come to light and have presented a proposal in budget 2013 to fix the problem.

• (1040)

[Translation]

The temporary foreign worker program should only be used to respond to urgent and acute needs for labour in the absence of Canadians to do the work required.

[English]

Our government's priority is jobs, economic growth and long-term prosperity. Among the largest industrialized countries in the world, such as the U.S., Japan and Germany, Canada has the strongest record of growth and job creation during the economic recovery. Since the depth of the global economic recession, the Canadian economy has created over 900,000 net new jobs, overwhelmingly full-time, well-paid jobs in the private sector. The economic recovery has been largely driven by the ingenuity and determination of Canadians and Canadian businesses.

At the same time, we are facing a paradox. There are labour market shortages in some parts of the country, while high unemployment rates persist in others. Changing patterns of economic growth are resulting in declining demand for skilled workers in some industries and rapid growth in demand in others. This is resulting in mismatches between the skills in the local labour force in some regions and the skills needed for new jobs, leading to shortages in some occupations that are key to the economy and prosperity.

Canada's economic action plan 2013 outlines several ways our government is addressing these challenges by connecting Canadians with available jobs.

We are acting now to equip Canadians with the skills and training they need to obtain high-quality, well-paying jobs. Unfortunately, the opposition has voted against many of these measures that help Canadians.

[Translation]

We announced the creation of the Canada job grant, which will establish a more direct link between training and the skills sought by employers.

[English]

The Canada jobs grant would provide up to \$15,000 or more per person to provide training to connect Canadians with jobs that are going unfilled today. We are creating opportunities for apprentices by making it easier for them to get the experience they need to become journeypersons. We are providing support to underrepresented groups, including persons with disabilities, youth, aboriginal Canadians and newcomers to help them enter the labour force and find jobs.

As the Prime Minister pointed out on Friday of last week, there are businesses that have been unable to find the workers they need to function. The temporary foreign worker program is there for them only when there are absolute and acute labour shortages. The rules are very clear. The temporary foreign worker program should only be used if no Canadian worker is available to fill that job.

When employers apply to hire temporary foreign workers, they are required to advertise for set periods of time to ensure that they have exhausted all possible means to hire Canadians. Employers must first advertise in national newspapers. In addition, they are encouraged to recruit among populations facing barriers to employment, such as aboriginal Canadians, older workers, newcomers, persons with disabilities and youth.

With respect to wages, let us be clear. All employers are required to pay temporary foreign workers the same wage they are paying their Canadian workers for doing the same job at the same location.

Employers must ensure that foreign workers are covered by private or provincial or territorial health insurance. According to the employment contracts, they must register foreign workers with the appropriate provincial and territorial workers' safety and compensation boards.

In addition, we have introduced measures to strengthen the protection of temporary foreign workers and to improve the integrity of the program. Employers who misuse the program or mistreat temporary foreign workers would face stiff penalties and could even be banned from the use of the temporary foreign worker program.

While the opposition is calling for more committee study and talk, we are acting. The member for Cape Breton—Canso has been part of our large studies that have been undertaken by the human resources standing committee to look into the labour and skills shortages across the country. As part of that study, we travelled to all regions of the country, consulting with representatives, employers and workers. The message we heard was very clear: There are acute labour shortages in several regions of the country. It would be a significant waste of taxpayer dollars to repeat this work and hear similar testimony.

[Translation]

Because of a lack of workers and skilled workers, companies cannot grow and develop, which will slow down our economy at a time when it is beginning to show signs of recovery. And who will suffer? All of us.

Business of Supply

[English]

That being said, we are concerned about the reports that the temporary foreign worker program has not been used for its intended purposes.

Let me focus for a moment on the actions our government has announced over the last several months. Last year, the government announced a review of the program. We also announced a stronger link between the employment insurance program and the temporary foreign worker program. This link is necessary, because many unemployed Canadians who are qualified to do these jobs sometimes do not even know they exist. Through the new job alerts program, EI claimants will be made aware of local employment opportunities on a daily basis. We also introduced legislative amendments to increase the ability of HRSDC to ensure compliance by employers.

In economic action plan 2013, we announced several reforms to ensure that Canadians will be given the first chance at all available jobs. We will increase recruitment efforts employers must make to hire Canadians before they are eligible to apply for temporary foreign workers, including increasing the length and reach of advertising. We will assist employers who legitimately rely on temporary foreign workers, due to a lack of qualified Canadian applicants, in finding ways to ensure that they have a plan to transition to a Canadian workforce over time. We will amend the immigration and refugee protection regulations to restrict the identification of non-official languages as job requirements when hiring through the temporary foreign worker program.

Finally, we are also proposing to introduce user fees from employers applying for temporary foreign workers through the labour market opinion process so that these costs are no longer absorbed by the taxpayers.

Our government remains focused on job creation, economic growth and long-term prosperity. The intent of this program is to create economic opportunities for Canadians by providing employers with access to individuals with the skills that Canadians do not currently have to grow their businesses. When this happens, it creates jobs for Canadians and does not reduce them. We have committed to reviewing this program to ensure that Canadians are not displaced and that the program is living up to its original purpose, that purpose being to help employers find temporary help in cases where there are absolute and acute labour shortages.

This program was never meant to replace Canadian workers with foreign workers. Employers have to advertise before they can access temporary foreign workers. It is clear that all parties in the House recognize the need for this program, as witnessed by the letters from the NDP and Liberal MPs requesting additional temporary foreign workers in their ridings on behalf of employers, including ridings with higher-than-average unemployment rates.

By connecting Canadians with available jobs programs, we are ensuring that Canadians are aware of all available employment opportunities in their local communities.

We are concerned about the issues that have recently come to light and have presented several proposals in budget 2013 to fix this program. Unfortunately, the opposition has chosen to vote against these measures that would help Canadians. In fact, the opposition

members have voted against our investments in skills training for Canadians, such as the Canada jobs grant, so that Canadians can fill in-demand jobs. Instead, they are proposing to spend more of taxpayers' dollars so that we can talk further about something the government has already committed to fix.

I would encourage the opposition to actually get behind the G8-leading economic leadership that has been shown by Canada and our Prime Minister, leadership that has resulted in over 900,000 net new jobs here in Canada since the downturn of the recession. I would encourage the opposition to join with us in voting against this motion and to support the actions proposed by our government to fix this program, as outlined in the budget and economic action plan 2013.

• (1045)

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is really quite astounding to hear the parliamentary secretary speak about the temporary foreign worker program, because what she has said is so far from the truth about what is actually going on that it just is mind-boggling.

I want to ask her about a particular aspect of the program. In 2012, the government launched an accelerated program, called ALMO, to fast-track applications. Under this program, employers do not have to provide any evidence that they are considering Canadians for open positions. There is now information that shows that probably half the ALMOs are being improperly used and that an astounding 5,000 of these applications were approved between April and December of 2012. I would like the parliamentary secretary to answer to that and to explain why this program has failed so badly, why it is being misused so badly, and why Canadians are now paying the price.

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, what the member opposite said is absolutely false. The individuals who can apply for accelerated labour market opinions are actually those who have pre-qualified and have already been in the system.

Let us be very clear. I think we all know that the temporary foreign worker program is for exactly that: temporary workers when a Canadian is not available. This government has been very clear. Canadians are to have the first crack at jobs. They are to be at the front of the line. However, we still need to make sure that when employers are concerned that they cannot fill jobs and are feeling the crunch of not being able to make sure that their companies can expand, they have access to a program that allows them to prosper.

This government is very focused. We are putting Canadians at the front of the line. We encourage opposition members to get on board, support our budget, support the changes and make sure that we can provide an opportunity for Canadians to have excellent jobs and a high quality of life.

Business of Supply

• (1050)

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have been listening to these debates with a great deal of interest. The idea of a parliamentary committee is a thoughtful, non-partisan way to proceed on a program that is obviously broken and is costing jobs for Canadians.

Despite the parliamentary secretary's rhetoric, there are huge problems and a mushrooming of numbers in the temporary foreign worker program in ways that are not adhering to the claimed objectives of the program.

My question to the parliamentary secretary is: Has the government done anything to learn from the experience of northern European countries that had temporary worker programs, which the research showed led to an avalanche of bankruptcies as their own businesses were unable to compete with the lower wages being paid and the worse working conditions?

Eventually those European countries—Germany, for example—made major changes to their programs. That is just the kind of thing a parliamentary committee could find out about. We already know what does not work, and the path the government has trod has already been shown to be ineffective in Europe.

Will the parliamentary secretary consider the committee on the basis that it can help us learn from others' mistakes to correct the government's mistakes?

Ms. Kellie Leitch: Mr. Speaker, as I have expressed, and as many members in the House have expressed, we have concerns with respect to this program.

To the point the member made, I mentioned in my speech that one of the things we are focusing on, as outlined in the budget on pages 84 and 85, is asking applicants for the labour market opinion process to look at transitioning to Canadian workforce individuals. In other words, I mean making sure we decrease the number temporary foreign workers that firms in Canada are relying on and putting together a plan to transition to Canadian workers.

We want to be very clear. Canadians are at the front of the line. We expect firms to adhere to the principles of this program, making sure Canadians are considered. If they are not available at all, the temporary foreign worker program will be available to firms. However, part of the application to the program is making sure there is a transition plan to make sure Canadians are filling those roles.

Mr. Kyle Seeback (Brampton West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to rise today to respond to the opposition day motion on the temporary foreign worker program. The government takes the recent allegations against the program very seriously. HRSDC officials are looking into the specifics of these situations to complete an investigation.

The original intent of the temporary foreign worker program is to help employers find temporary help in cases where there is an absolute and acute labour shortage. That is an important issue. The program was never meant to allow companies to replace Canadians with foreign workers. The clear focus of our government is on jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. As part of that, of course, Canadians must always have the first crack at any available job. Even now, after several years of the worst of the global recession,

our economic recovery to date remains fragile. Yes, we are fortunate that Canada has the best economic performance in the G7, the strongest record of growth and job creation, but of course we cannot be complacent.

Our largest trading partner is struggling with a massive debt and modest economic growth. The euro area remains mired in a recession. At the same time, global competition from emerging markets is continuing to intensify, and these are challenges abroad.

However, there are also challenges right here at home. It is no secret that Canada is experiencing a mismatch between the skills workers have and the skills employers are seeking. The skills shortage is particularly severe in some trades and professional occupations, such as electricians, carpenters and engineers. In fact, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce is one of many business organizations across the country that has identified the Canadian skills shortage as the number-one issue facing its membership. When all professions are considered, it is estimated that by 2015 there will be 1.5 million skilled-job vacancies and that number will rise to 2.6 million by 2021. Our long-term skills shortage is one of the most significant socio-economic challenges we face in Canada today, and addressing our labour shortages and skills mismatches needs to be a priority in this House for all parties.

I know that both the Liberal and NDP MPs recognize this, because they have written to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development on many occasions to intervene on behalf of local businesses. What are they intervening for? They are intervening for more temporary foreign workers. This is even in ridings with higher than average or seasonal unemployment. That is why we need programs that are responsive and flexible to ensure Canada's labour market meets employers' needs and ensures that Canadians look to the Canadian labour market first.

A key part of our plan for jobs, growth and long-term prosperity is that the government is moving forward with a plan to address the skills challenge. We are working to ensure that Canadians have the opportunities to gain the skills employers are looking for, so they do not need to rely on foreign workers.

Business of Supply

Budget 2013 just announced the creation of the Canada job grant, which would provide \$15,000 or more per person to ensure Canadians are getting the skills that employers are seeking. I know from my pre-budget consultations with small-business people in my riding that this is a huge issue for them. They need funding to develop the skills they need for their local businesses, and of course business people are the best ones to determine what skills they need. When fully implemented, the job grant would benefit an estimated 130,000 Canadians and would shift training from government to job creators and available workers who are better placed to determine what skills are needed; again, exactly what Canadian business people are asking for. The job grant would do a better job of connecting Canadians to the available jobs by attaching training to an available and unfilled job. We would match that up, and it would be a great program.

We would also create opportunities for apprentices by making it easier for them to get the experience they need. This would include the purchasing power of the government when contributing to projects such as the creation of social housing. For far too long, there has been a reluctance of young men and women in this country to become apprentices. This is why our government would provide additional incentives to reduce barriers to entry for those who wish to enter into the specialized trades.

• (1055)

We would also provide support to under-represented groups, including persons with disabilities, youth, aboriginal peoples and newcomers, to help them find good jobs.

There are about 800,000 Canadians with a disability who are not working but whose disability does not prevent them from working. Of those, more than 340,000 have obtained some form of post-secondary education. Our government believes that these individuals are a significantly untapped pool of talent with major contributions to make to Canadian society.

These improvements are part of our long-term plan that is focused on creating jobs, growth and prosperity.

Decisions in the private sector need to be made quickly. If a business opportunity arises in Canada and a Canadian business cannot capitalize on it quickly, then that business does not grow and new jobs and economic opportunities are not created for Canadians.

That is why we have the temporary foreign worker program for those absolute and acute labour shortages. When labour shortages are acute, the temporary foreign worker program is a short-term solution for businesses so they can continue to grow and create more economic opportunities for Canadians. The temporary foreign worker program is intended as a measure of last resort. It was designed to be a short-term solution for employers until a qualified Canadian can be found for that job.

Canadians must always have first priority for job vacancies. If employers cannot demonstrate that they are making genuine efforts to recruit Canadians first, they are not allowed to hire temporary foreign workers. That is clear from the program. The temporary foreign worker program was never intended to bring in foreign workers when able-bodied Canadians are ready, willing and able to take those positions.

As the minister has publicly stated, there have been some issues raised that she is very concerned with, and the government is currently investigating those concerns.

Further to the review of the temporary foreign worker program announced last year, economic action plan 2013 committed to specific reforms to ensure that Canadians get the first chance at available jobs. These changes would include measures to increase the length and reach of advertising for open positions before authorizing foreign workers.

We are also proposing to introduce user fees so Canadian taxpayers do not always have to bear the costs. We would amend the immigration and refugee protection regulations to restrict the use of non-official languages, as a job requirement.

As I previously stated, Canadians should always have the first crack at an available job in Canada.

Let me briefly sum up.

Foreign workers have the same rights as Canadian workers, including the assurance of at least the same pay for the same work at the same location. Let me repeat that. All employers are required to pay temporary foreign workers the same wage they are paying Canadian workers doing the same job at the same location.

Today Canada is recognized throughout the developed world for the resilience of our economy, and I mentioned that earlier. Canada has the best economic performance in the G7. Our low-tax environment, our highly educated and skilled labour force and our natural resource potential combined with a strong financial sector make us the economic envy of the world. However we cannot lose focus. In a fast-changing, competitive global economy, Canadians must continually aim higher to avoid falling behind. The Government of Canada will continue to promote economic growth, job creation and long-term prosperity for all Canadians.

Instead of spending more time studying this issue, I invite members of the opposition to support the actions that the government is proposing to fix this program. Instead of voting against new funding to help provide the skills Canadians need to find better paying employment, the opposition should support our economic plan. This is a plan that has created more than 900,000 net new jobs since the peak of the recession.

This is why the government will not be supporting the opposition's motion. We call on the opposition to support our efforts to reform the program in the interest of all Canadians.

Business of Supply

●(1100)

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that the member has a role to play here and has to read out the speaking notes he received from the minister, but the program simply is not as rosy as he is suggesting. I want to draw his attention to an email I received from a journeyman in the roofing industry in Edmonton, Alberta, who says:

The offshore workers have signed a two year agreement for 10% less than the journeymen are paid. The company has borne the cost of flights and living expenses for offshore workers. At times there are language barriers, due to these workers not speaking or understanding English.

The flat roofing crews are busy working summer and fall. In the winter work slows down. Journeymen are told to stay home by their phone for emergency repairs. Offshore employees are working. Shoveling snow, counting screws and being paid for a 40 hour week.

Journeymen possibly work 10 hours a week....

Journeymen have contacted PC Riding office, to be told to go and collect welfare. Someone, please explain to me is WELFARE the only option???

That is the question I would like to pose to the member on behalf of the journeyman in Edmonton, Alberta.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Mr. Speaker, I will not comment on the specifics of the case, but what I can say is exactly what I have said. The temporary foreign worker program is absolutely not there, not designed, for jobs to be taken away from Canadians. That is not the intent of the program. If that is happening, that is one of the reasons why the department will look into these allegations. We take them very seriously.

The member from the NDP suggests there is something wrong with the program, yet there are eight members from that party who have written to the minister asking for more temporary foreign workers to be allowed in their ridings. If the program is so bad, why are they asking those kinds of things?

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I am concerned about the whole concept of a temporary foreign worker program in relation to what it means for foreign workers.

We do need immigration to Canada. We do need people coming from around the world to enrich our society. In the past, those people had rights. Once they were living in Canada, working in Canada, they could access those rights.

I want to put for the member for Brampton West a specific example. In the case of the XL beef plant, a large part of the workforce, I understand, was temporary foreign workers, largely from Senegal.

In that plant, one worker on the line was required to handle 300 carcasses an hour and was supposed to clean his or her knife between each piece of work he or she did. Had those been Canadian workers, I believe they would have said to the boss that they could not clean their knives between each job they had to cut up a carcass and that they could not do 300 carcasses an hour and keep up with the workload.

However, because they knew if they complained, the temporary foreign workers might find themselves on the first plane back to Senegal, we ended up having the E. coli scandal that threatened the health of the Canadian beef sector.

I ask my friend whether we can look at the larger question. Do we want to encourage a program in which we ask people to come to Canada who have no rights, no rights to complain, no rights to do a good job, no rights to seek the protections of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms? Also, do we not want to give those jobs to Canadians first?

●(1105)

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Mr. Speaker, I will reiterate what I said earlier. Of course these jobs should be for Canadians. As I said in my speech, the temporary foreign worker program is for absolute and acute labour shortages. The program is not designed for foreign workers to come in and take the jobs of Canadians.

With respect to allegations of what is going on in the workplace, all businesses in our country are governed by many pieces of legislation that govern what goes on in the workplace.

In Ontario, there is the Workplace Safety Act and there is the Employment Act, which regulates the amount of hours people have to work and the working conditions. All those pieces of legislation are for the benefit of whatever worker is in the country. If those things are going on, there are remedies for those workers, whether they are Canadian workers or temporary foreign workers.

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there has been a tsunami of concern. The parliamentary secretary had probably eight concerns in her speech. We got two in one sentence from that member.

Canadians are concerned. The RBC employees who are now training people from offshore to take their jobs are concerned.

We are looking for action and by supporting this motion, we have a chance to fix this program and get it right.

I ask my colleague if he is concerned about this. When the Conservatives took over, the unemployment rate in Toronto was 7.2%. There were 24,000 temporary foreign workers in Toronto at that time. The unemployment rate, under their watch, has gone up a point and a half in Toronto, but they have added an additional 40,000 to 50,000 temporary foreign workers.

Could my colleague rationalize that? Could he go one past concern? How can you justify that? You are on the wrong side of it —

The Deputy Speaker: Time is up, and I would again draw to the attention to the member for Cape Breton—Canso to address his questions to the Chair, not to individual members.

The hon. member for Brampton West, a short answer please.

Mr. Kyle Seeback: Mr. Speaker, he is new, so I understand that he might not know who he is supposed to address.

The unemployment rate might be up from when the Liberals were in office, but we had a gigantic economic downturn. Was the unemployment rate lower in Canada than in the United States when that member's party was the government? The answer is no.

Business of Supply

Historically, unemployment has been higher in Canada than in the United States. It is under this government that it is lower. The reason why it is lower is because of the actions this government took during the economic downturn. That is why our economic performance is far better than it was under that government.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I rise on a point of order. The member for Brampton West made reference to the number of letters the NDP members sent requesting temporary foreign workers in their ridings. How does the member have that information?

This is an attack on my rights as a member of Parliament and it has to stop. Is there a spy machine over there watching every time we go to the washroom or raise a letter with a minister? There is no place for that in the House of Commons. How big is the spy and attack machine in the Conservative government?

• (1110)

The Deputy Speaker: I have to advise the House, and the member for Malpeque in particular, that I do not see that as a point of order.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain.

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time today with the member for Newton—North Delta.

I am pleased to rise in the House to call the Conservative government to account for its complete mismanagement of the temporary foreign workers program. It has to stop and it has to stop now because Canadians are paying the price.

I do not think I need to remind anyone in the House of the scandals that rightfully have Canadians up in arms and demanding action. It was just a couple of weeks ago that reports revealed that 45 employees at the Royal Bank of Canada in Toronto were set to lose their jobs after the bank contracted technological services to iGate, an outsourcing firm that uses foreign workers. To add insult to injury, affected bank employees reported that they were asked to train the people taking their jobs. It is disgusting.

According to the rules, none of that should have been possible. Before they are able to hire temporary foreign workers, employers need to get a positive labour market opinion that demonstrates that bringing in foreign workers will not take jobs away from available and qualified Canadian citizens or permanent residents. By the government's own admission, RBC did get such an LMO from HRSDC. Clearly, something went very wrong, but neither the government nor the bank are fully taking responsibility.

In the case of the bank, it was a full five days before it issued an apology to workers and offered assurances that comparable job opportunities would be made available to the 45 affected RBC employees. Although the government has acknowledged that the LMO issued to iGate must be reviewed, there is still no timeline for either the review or action.

To make matters worse, we know that RBC is not the only example. Members will of course remember the myriad of news reports last year about HD Mining. In that case, the government had also issued questionable LMOs, this time paving the way for a company in B. C. to hire Chinese workers. The LMOs were issued

despite the fact that some 300 Canadians applied for the positions. The upshot in that case is that a judicial review is now under way in Federal Court that will decide the fate of 201 temporary foreign workers hired at HD Mining International's coal mining Murray River project in Tumbler Ridge, B.C. It should never have gone to that point.

The Conservatives keep feigning outrage, but they created the loopholes that allow companies to abuse the temporary foreign worker program and displace Canadian jobs. Clearly, the system is broken.

Let me just give one last set of examples, this time from Alberta.

In 2012, the Conservatives launched a new accelerated labour market opinion to create a fast track stream for higher-skilled workers, such as management, professional and technical occupations. Under the ALMO, employers do not need to provide evidence of considering Canadians for open positions. They simply need to show that they advertised the job on the federal job bank for seven days. Less than 20% of ALMO applications will be subject to a compliance review and very little documentation is required during the application process. Evidence from government documents obtained by the Alberta Federation of Labour showed that nearly half of all ALMOs appeared to be improperly used to fill low-skill positions, such as at gas stations and fast food chains.

There are still 1.4 million unemployed Canadians. As the NDP leader asked in question period yesterday, which skills exactly are required to work at the Tim Hortons that the Conservatives do not think Canadians have?

It is not just happening in Alberta. Temporary foreign workers are replacing clerical workers in Ontario, fish plant workers in Newfoundland and Labrador and miners in British Columbia. It has to stop.

The TFW program was never intended to take jobs away from hard-working Canadians. In fact, this may be a good time to review the program's intent. The purpose of the temporary foreign worker program is to enable employers to hire foreign workers on a temporary basis to fill immediate skills and labour shortages when, and this is the critical part, Canadian citizens and permanent residents are not available to do the job. Clearly, that is not how the program is being used now.

Business of Supply

Exponential increases in the use of the program, combined with reports that the program is being used against its purpose, prove that the Conservatives have completely lost control. Let us look at the numbers. The number of temporary foreign workers in Canada grew significantly under the Liberals and exponentially under the Conservatives. From 2002 to 2012, the number of TFWs present in Canada more than tripled, from 101,098 to 338,189. The number of TFWs in Canada grew from 100,000 to 160,000 under the Liberals and then doubled again under the Prime Minister.

• (1115)

The problem is that these temporary foreign workers are coming in at a time of record unemployment in the country. As I just pointed out, nearly 1.4 million Canadians are currently out of work. In March alone, we saw the loss of 54,000 full-time jobs, the biggest drop in four years. There are six unemployed Canadians for every available job, and under the current Prime Minister's watch, unemployment has increased by 320,000.

The unemployment rate remains in double digits in Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick and P.E.I., and the Conservatives continue to fail Canada's youth, as their unemployment rate has gone up to 14.2%. In my home province of Ontario, employment is down by 17,000. It declined by 15,000 in British Columbia, 11,000 in Alberta and 17,000 in Quebec. Canadians are clamouring for jobs, but the Conservatives are failing them when it comes to job creation, and the jobs that are available are now being given away to the lowest bidder. Let us make no mistake: that is what is really going on here. The government's handling of the temporary foreign worker program is part of its larger agenda to drive down wages in our country.

Let us look at the record. The Conservatives are attacking collective bargaining rights, forcing seniors to work an extra two years and kicking workers off EI unless they take a 30% pay cut. Now they are taking jobs away from Canadian workers and legislating lower pay for the foreign workers who replace them.

The Prime Minister's message to Canadians is clear: work for less or be replaced. How else can we explain the long record of broken promises when it comes to the temporary foreign worker program? We were promised action in the fall of 2009, in budget 2012, again when the HD Mining story broke, in budget 2013 and again just this month, when the RBC controversy came to light.

We have seen lots of talk. What we have not yet seen from the Conservatives is any concrete action. I worry that the Liberal motion before the House today risks leading us to the same weak results. It is precisely because I agree that the use of temporary foreign workers to replace Canadian workers in jobs that Canadians are qualified to do is an abuse of the temporary foreign worker program that I want to see concrete action.

However, what the Liberals are proposing is to set up a Conservative-dominated committee. How does that change anything? It risks creating a platform for the Conservatives to make more hollow promises without any guarantee that businesses will find the workers they need and that Canadian workers will have the opportunities they deserve. That is the result we must achieve.

Instead of setting up a committee, why do we not just adopt the motion that stands in my name on the order paper? It resolves that in the opinion of the House, the temporary foreign worker program is seriously flawed and mismanaged and that the government should take a number of steps. First, it should stop permitting employers to misuse the program. Second, it should repeal the provision allowing temporary foreign workers to be paid 15% less than Canadian workers. Finally, it should announce a clear timeline for independent review of the temporary foreign worker program and its impact on Canadian employment and labour standards.

I would encourage all members to support this much stronger alternative because it calls for the kind of action and accountability that all Canadians deserve.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to make it very clear that we recognize that there are some flaws within this program and that changes need to be made. If we ask Canadians to look at the bottom line numbers, no one will believe that there is a need for 338,000 or more foreign workers here in Canada today.

However, let there be no doubt that there is a need for temporary foreign workers in Canada. They are absolutely critical for the survival of many industries from coast to coast. It is the Conservative government that has abused the program to the degree that we have serious problems, now flaws, within it that have to be addressed.

The motion being presented today by the Liberal Party would ultimately ensure that the long-term viability of this critical program, which is of absolute importance to our nation, is acted upon. It would put into place a mechanism that allows for the public, premiers and other stakeholders to come to the table and express what they believe is essential in correcting the program.

My question to the member is this: why will she not acknowledge that it is best to consult with the different stakeholders and have them come to the table and express the concerns they have, whether they are from Alberta or Newfoundland and Labrador? They have to be afforded the opportunity to come and present their cases and then we can—

• (1120)

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The hon. member for Hamilton Mountain has the floor.

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member's passion. I just do not see that passion reflected in the motion that the Liberals brought before the House.

I absolutely agree that there is a need in Canada for the temporary foreign worker program. I also believe we need to make fundamental changes to that program, including, frankly, protecting temporary foreign workers when it comes to health and safety and labour protections, which of course the government has not addressed at all.

Business of Supply

The member passionately says this program is flawed. Yes, it is. We know temporary foreign workers are being paid 15% less than their counterparts. We know what the problems are with this program. We have the example of HD Mining from a year ago. We now have examples from RBC. How much more studying do we need to do before we create solutions?

That is what we are charged with as parliamentarians. We are here to represent hard-working Canadians whose jobs are being displaced by temporary foreign workers. I am committed to delivering results for Canadians. I do not want more talk. I want to be able to deliver action to constituents whose jobs are being displaced through a temporary foreign worker program that is fundamentally flawed.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there are a number of issues on which Canadians are often ahead of politicians. I was immigration critic for a year and heard a lot from Canadians across this country about what they would like to see in a temporary foreign worker program. It is quite obvious Canadians understand that there is some need for a temporary foreign worker program of some type in certain specific and narrow circumstances, but Canadians also believe in and want a program that ensures employers conduct a thorough canvassing of Canadians first to make sure there are truly no Canadians available to do the work. Second, they want to make sure that Canadians get skills training so that before employers seek workers from abroad, everything is being done to ensure that unemployed young people and workers across this country have first crack at acquiring the skills they need to do the jobs.

The Conservatives have been making fun of the fact that New Democrats have sent eight letters out of hundreds of thousands of temporary foreign worker applications. That is because New Democrats realize that there are certain specific occasions when temporary foreign workers are needed by employers, and New Democrats help those employers when the applications are rejected by the government. There is no shame in that.

What I want to ask my colleague this. does she think that this program can be rehabilitated? What does she think of Canadians' requests that this program make sure that Canadians have first crack at jobs before employers seek to fill those jobs by hiring people who do not live here?

Ms. Chris Charlton: Mr. Speaker, yes, I think the temporary foreign worker program can be rehabilitated and, frankly, I think it has played an important role in dealing with skills and labour shortages at specific times in the Canadian community and in cycles of the Canadian economy.

The member is absolutely right. The program is supposed to be designed so that Canadians have access to jobs first. That is what we need to return to. That has to be a critical part of the rehabilitation. It is not good enough to post jobs for seven days on some website and count that as making jobs available to Canadians.

The member is also absolutely right when he talks about the government's complete failure to deal with skills training issues so that we can make sure that Canadians have the skills to take the high-skilled jobs that the government is saying employers cannot fill unless they go to foreign countries to recruit employees.

● (1125)

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to be able to speak on today's opposition motion.

For quite some time now the New Democrats have been keenly aware that the temporary foreign worker program is being grossly mismanaged by the Conservative government. Indeed, we have been quite vocal about it here in the House.

Over and over again there are cases in the news, and more closely in my parliamentary inbox, that remind me of the government's flawed execution of what ought to be a functional, important and complementary tool for employers and ultimately for all Canadians where genuine skill shortages exist in this country.

Unfortunately, it is all too clear that the program is not being administered with diligence by the Conservative government. Last year's HD Mining debacle in B.C. is one example. The growing backlog under the live-in caregiver program, which the immigration minister himself has admitted is problematic and needs fixing, is another example. Another example is that temporary foreign workers are currently being used to outsource jobs at RBC while their predecessors are training them. The list goes on.

Just over the last two weeks, several individuals have contacted my office to tell the same story. They were brought to Canada as skilled workers and they tell stories of abuse and living in fear. Now we are uncovering staggering abuses of the ALMO.

Let me be clear: I and all my New Democrat colleagues fully support the temporary foreign worker program and believe it should be part of a strategy to help businesses find the workers they need where real skill shortages exist. Our criticism is directed entirely towards the program's mismanagement or, more accurately, its obvious mismanagement under the current government. I want to make sure there is no question about precisely what we are taking aim at here.

The Conservative government keeps feigning outrage over revelations of inappropriate usage of the program, such as those exposed via the evidence out of RBC this month. However, it is the Conservatives who created the loopholes that are currently allowing companies to abuse the temporary foreign worker program to displace Canadian jobs. It is also the Conservative government that is issuing the visas required for the program.

The Conservatives continue to promise full reviews and investigation of this program, yet no substantial changes have arisen. Instead, all evidence suggests the problems with it are only multiplying.

Business of Supply

From 2002 to 2012, the number of temporary foreign workers present in Canada more than tripled, from just over 100,000 to nearly 340,000. To break that down, the number of temporary foreign workers in Canada grew under the Liberals from 100,000 to 160,000 and then doubled under the current government. Neither side is clean.

In fact, the current government admits the number of temporary foreign workers entering Canada has generally outpaced the number of economic immigrants. In 2012, the gap surpassed 60,000.

Quite frankly, that gap startles me. Knowing that the government allows employers to pay temporary foreign workers 15% less than it would pay a permanent resident or a Canadian citizen, I am compelled to think about the unemployment rates in this country. The government's priority ought to be Canadian jobs. When I look at the unemployment rate, I am deeply concerned. Nearly 1.4 million Canadians are out of work, and in March alone we saw the loss of 54,000 full-time jobs, the biggest drop in four years.

There are six unemployed Canadians for every available job. Unemployment has increased under the current government. The unemployment rate remains in double digits in Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and P.E.I., yet the government chooses to focus its efforts on clawing away at EI benefits, conducting spot checks and setting quotas, and punishing Canadians at the time they need that program the most, a program that they paid into.

As well, the Conservatives continue to fail young people. The youth unemployment rate in this country has increased to 14.2%.

•(1130)

When I look at these numbers, I cannot help but suggest that the Conservative government has a responsibility, an obligation, to unemployed Canadians first. That responsibility must extend to ensuring diligent and accurate labour market opinions. There has been a lot of suggestion in cases of late that the LMOs under the current government are not accurately reflecting the market. The skills are already available here in Canada, and those workers are training the migrant workers.

However, it does not seem that the Conservatives agree that they have a responsibility to Canadians first. In 2012, they launched a new ALMO to create a fast-track stream for higher skilled workers such as those in management, professional, and technical occupations. Already, just a year later, investigations imply that ALMOs are being misused to seek foreign labourers for lower skilled occupations. The investigation of the Alberta Federation of Labour revealed that nearly 50% of all ALMOs are being improperly used. This is unacceptable.

Under the ALMO employers do not have to provide evidence that Canadians have been considered for open positions. They need only to show that the job was advertised through the federal job bank for seven days. Perhaps most alarming, fewer than 20% of ALMO applications will be subject to a compliance review. That means over 80% of ALMO applications are granted without any compliance checks.

The government is interested in investigating and reviewing the problem. Might I suggest that its own frivolous issuing of ALMOs is

an excellent place to begin? It does not need reviewing, it needs action.

Workers' rights groups continue to raise concerns about rights violations and poor working conditions for these temporary foreign workers in Canada. It is a worry that plagues me deeply as well. Documented incidents include workers being forced to: work in different jobs than the ones they were contracted for, work under dangerous or illegal conditions, keep silent about injuries or illnesses for fear of reprisal from the employer, live in housing provided by the employer that is substandard and overcrowded, and be isolated by their reliance on employer transportation. The Conservatives have not done enough work with the provinces on monitoring conditions for temporary foreign workers.

On November 9, 2012, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development indicated that she was not satisfied with how the permits were granted for HD Mining in B.C. Several workers were sent home and the Conservative government announced that it was reviewing the program. The minister made that comment five long months ago. However, the latest stories out of RBC, which have prompted employees from other big businesses to come forward with comparable stories, do not suggest that her review has, thus far, been effective in the least.

The Auditor General told the government in 2009 that HRSDC does not ensure quality and consistency of decisions when issuing labour market opinions. Therefore, last year's HD Mining evidence was not the Conservatives' first indication that the program was broken under their administration.

Finally, I want to point out that it is only after months of New Democrats leading the charge of criticism on the government's mismanagement of the temporary foreign worker program that my Liberal colleagues took note of it. Canadians are tired of empty promises and unaccountable reviews that go nowhere. It seems the Liberals are content with setting up a committee controlled and dominated by the Conservatives.

Canadians want action. New Democrats want action. We are calling for real changes. There have been ample reviews and studies. We know what is wrong with this program. The Conservatives know what is wrong with this program. Therefore, New Democrats are calling on the Conservatives to fix the program now.

•(1135)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciated quite a bit of my colleague's speech. However, the intent of the motion is to bring some fact around this issue and to fix the program.

Business of Supply

What we have seen is that the Conservative government is driven by ideology, as opposed to evidence-based policy development. The intent of the motion is to bring experts together around this issue, pick their brains, get some advice, and try to fix the program for all involved. It is an important part of the Canadian workforce. However, it is important that we get to the truth.

She says let us just change it. However, I am concerned about the NDP's position. What we see is that one in eight jobs created are filled by temporary foreign workers. That should be of great concern.

Yesterday, in relation to the number of jobs filled, her leader said 40% went to temporary foreign workers. I ask her, could she explain where she got that figure?

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, first, let me be very clear. We are not against consultation. We are not against people getting together from all different areas to discuss an issue. However, sometimes we have to take action in order to plug a flood. When we take that action, then we can take our time to study the issue in detail.

Right now, it is the government that is failing in its oversight and not doing due diligence when it comes to ALMOs and LMOs. It is also the government that has put in place that temporary foreign workers can be paid 15% less. That is an additional incentive.

With unemployment sitting at 1.4 million people in Canada today, I would say every Canadian across this country, whether they are Canadian citizens or whether they arrived in Canada a week ago, are permanent residents. They all want to have decent-paying jobs right here in Canada.

By the way, we are not blaming the temporary foreign workers who are brought in, because we are very cognizant of the fact that many of them live in some terrible conditions and face abuse. That is why we are calling for protections as well.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at the outset, I would say that the member for Cape Breton—Canso wants the member to respond about where the 40% came from. Did I get that right?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Right on. Right on.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Thank you.

Mr. Speaker, I am not sure where the 40% came from either.

I would say to the member that the temporary foreign worker program, as we have said time and time again, is not to displace Canadian workers. Where there are egregious examples—and that is what we are really talking about; we should just call a spade a spade and say there have been some egregious abuses of the system—the government has indicated that we are going to review it and we are going to respond.

However, members of the member's caucus have in fact gone to the minister and requested temporary foreign workers be allowed to come into Canada to fill unfilled vacant jobs; for example, the members for Skeena—Bulkley Valley, Halifax, Ottawa Centre, Churchill, British Columbia Southern Interior, Sackville—Eastern Shore, Trois-Rivières, and Brome—Missisquoi. These are members

of your own caucus who understand that sometimes it is appropriate to bring in temporary foreign workers.

The Deputy Speaker: Again, I would point out to the member for Peterborough that if he is going to be addressing comments, that he address them to the Chair and not to individual members.

The hon. member for Newton—North Delta.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims: Mr. Speaker, I think maybe my colleague across the way missed the part of the speech where I clarified that the NDP caucus has been very clear, as has our leader, that we fully support the temporary foreign worker program and believe it needs to be a strategy. If our members have written letters, it has been because they have been presented with LMOs and ALMOs where they have seen there is a need.

However, what the member implies is that we are against the temporary foreign worker program. We are not. We are against the abuse of it, and the abuse of it is not by just the mining industry and the RBC. We hear stories day in and day out, actually, hundreds of stories every single day, of the abuses that are occurring. When people get abused to this extent and the issues make it to the Supreme Court and the government still takes no action, then we begin to wonder what the real agenda is.

● (1140)

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to stand to support this motion. The reason we brought it forward is evident. To say that we cannot do anything about this is not true. A standing committee would allow what has been kept underground and what we still do not have answers for to come to light. We would hear witnesses. There would be an ability to travel. There would be an ability to get information that so far has not been forthcoming from the government so that we could see whether the program is working well, whether it is being abused, where the abuses lie, and what can be done about it.

I do not know if the government will have the foresight to support the motion. If it passes I would suggest that this particular standing committee not act in the fashion that the rest of the standing committees are continuing to act, where witnesses are blocked if they are giving contradictory testimony, the testimony itself is not allowed in a report, or the recommendations the witnesses make are ignored. This would not only bring to light the issues and get the accountability and transparency needed on this particular foreign worker program that we think has been mismanaged, it would also allow for clear recommendations to go through rather than allowing the seven members on any parliamentary committee to do what they have been doing, which is to silence witnesses, pretend their recommendations did not get ignored, and have all political parties bring in dissenting reports, which used to be rare in this House and now seems to be done at every single hearing where nobody gets to have anything that the witnesses say come forward.

Business of Supply

I want to support this because the temporary foreign worker program itself is a very important part of the Canadian labour market strategy. We know that it brings important economic and labour market benefits. For instance, it is necessary to maintain productivity in certain areas and to improve economic prosperity for Canada. It is an important program.

The program operates under two clear principles. One is that a temporary foreign worker would be brought in to do a job that a Canadian could not do because of lack of skills or knowledge. The other reason a temporary foreign worker would come in is to do the job that a Canadian would not do because of the pay structure or the nature of the job itself. We know there are Canadians who would not do some of these jobs. Therefore, the temporary foreign worker program serves as a benefit to those who “could not do” or “would not do” in terms of the Canadian labour market.

We know the program was established by a Liberal government. There was a careful balance the program was to find, which was to protect the jobs and wages of Canadian workers while bringing in temporary foreign workers, and to ensure that Canadian workers had access in the meantime to the employment and skills training opportunities they lacked, that allowed temporary foreign workers to come in. It was also meant to assist small and medium-sized businesses and corporations that had legitimate difficulties in finding workers. The program was also supposed to protect the dignity of temporary foreign workers by ensuring they were paid a fair wage, were treated as fairly as any Canadian worker doing the same job, and fell under the labour laws of the particular province in which they were working.

The Conservative government has destroyed this balance entirely. It has skewed the system in favour of employers only. It has turned a blind eye to the way this program has been carried out and to the rights of the temporary foreign workers. It has brought in workers not because there was a lack of skills in the Canadian economy but allowed companies, as we have seen with RBC, to bring them in to replace people who can and are trained to do the work thereby completely going against the concept of the temporary foreign worker program. To add insult to injury the Canadian workers who have the skills are training temporary foreign workers to do the work, thereby being deprived of the jobs themselves.

That is not how the system was supposed to work.

● (1145)

The Conservatives may say that, in fact, RBC and others are working under the aegis of the law and that what they are doing is legal. However, we know that by completely ignoring some of the regulations, the current government has not been doing any kind of evaluation or monitoring of what is going on. We have been asking for statistics that would tell us where the workers are working, what kind of jobs they are doing and what they are being paid. We have been asking for that for a long time and have not gotten answers. These questions have been asked since 2006 by the Canadian Labour Congress, and there have been no answers forthcoming from the current government.

The committee we are suggesting would make transparent some of the data we want. The important thing about any program is accountability. To have that there must be monitoring and there must

be transparency. This is currently lacking in the temporary foreign worker program. All we get is the mumbling by the government that it is all being done the way it should be done. However, we see that with RBC, for example, it is not being done. We see, for instance, in B.C. that over 200 Chinese workers were brought in, and not because they were needed in B.C. It is a mining province. We have tons of people who are skilled in mining. Yet the Chinese temporary workers were brought in to fill the needs of the mine, and the government allowed this to happen.

The bottom line is that the Conservatives know what the rules are, but they are not enforcing them. They know what the rules are, and they are not monitoring them.

Here we also have the idea that when temporary foreign workers come, they are supposed to be treated under the current labour laws of the country. We saw in the building of the Canada Line in Vancouver going from Richmond to Vancouver that, in fact, two sets of foreign workers were brought in to build the line, because they had the skills. One set came from Europe and another came from Costa Rica. The Costa Ricans came because they were the only ones who knew how to operate the particular boring machinery that was supposed to go underground and create the line itself. They were being paid half the wage of the European temporary foreign workers. They were not given all of the particular benefits they were supposed to get. If it were not for the B.C. building trades, which took this to a human rights tribunal, we would not have known that this was happening. Finally the tribunal had them pay \$2.5 million in back wages to equalize how these particular Costa Rican workers were treated in Canada as compared to the European workers.

The government is asleep on the job. The Conservatives should have picked up on that. That happened in 2008. Nothing was said by the government.

Again, no one here is opposed to the temporary foreign worker program. We are looking at what has happened since the government has come to power and what it has done to change the nature of the temporary foreign worker program. Not only that, we have seen a ballooning to about 338,000 temporary foreign workers as of 2012. Good grief. We are living in a time in Canada when so many people are looking for work. Last month, 54,000 Canadians were looking for work, and they are skilled. Yet temporary foreign workers are taking over the jobs Canadians are trained to do and can do. In some instances, temporary foreign workers who are coming in to do the jobs Canadians are not trained to do are being discriminated against. The government is allowing that to happen.

Business of Supply

This is not just about the Costa Ricans and the Chinese miners. I have a lot of pilots in my riding. They have written to me and said that the government is allowing temporary seasonal pilots to come into Canada to fly Canadian planes within Canada, and that is interfering with the junior pilot program. Trained pilots in Canada have to do a certain number of hours and get experience flying so that they can move up the ladder and become permanent pilots and get the pilot jobs. This seasonal worker program has completely destroyed the junior pilot program.

We see workers being brought in to do jobs that Canadians are trained to do. This is mishandling, misuse and complete bungling. I hope that this is just because of incompetence and it is not being done because the government wants to facilitate employers actually discriminating against Canadian workers. This is causing people to rise up and be concerned. Yet we cannot get answers. Again, the committee we are talking about would get us the answers.

• (1150)

We need to restore confidence in the program. We need to find out which employers are benefiting from the \$35.5 million being paid to process ALMOs. We do not know which employers are benefiting. The government did a consultation and heard from employers that they wanted to be able to bypass the ALMO process and fast-forward it. Not only did they want to fast-forward it, but certain employers and certain companies wanted to be exempt from that kind of second look and transparency. They wanted to be able to just bring in whomever they wanted. This is how RBC did what it did. The government heard that and allowed it to happen. However, what it did not say is that there were three other things the consultation revealed. It revealed that the employers also asked for a minimum two-year contract for temporary foreign workers. We saw that with RBC it was a six-month contract. That alone contravened the concept of a minimum two-year contract.

The employers also asked for that contract to be expanded to four years if no Canadians were trained or able to perform those jobs in the interim. They asked for one further thing, which is not happening and which the government has been very careful to make sure will not happen. It was that temporary foreign workers would be allowed to apply for permanent residence in Canada and therefore become citizens.

Think about it. People are working for two to four years as temporary foreign workers. They now know how to speak English and French. They understand the Canadian workplace. They understand the rules and ethics of the Canadian workplace. They would make excellent ongoing permanent workers.

The temporary foreign worker program was there not only to deal with labour market strategies but to help nation-build. When people came here and learned and were able to work and become fluent in English and French and were able to contribute, they wanted to bring their families. We wanted them to bring their families, at least Liberals did when we brought in the program. We wanted them to put roots down, to build a nation, to have a stake in this country and to know that what is good for the country is good for them and what is good for them is good for the country. We wanted them to become strong Canadian citizens. That is how this country was built. In the most recent years of the last 20 years or so, this country has

benefited from the temporary foreign worker program. This is not an exploitation of people who come here, work and then are sent back and told that they cannot apply for residency status. This is what we see the current Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism doing.

We have employers who may argue that the ability to get the information we seek should not be asked of them, because they are private. However, the government has to make very clear that the information it requires from private employers is about accountability to taxpayers, whose money is funding the program. This is the ability to have transparency and accountability that is so lacking in the government.

We have seen in the temporary foreign worker program that provincial laws have not been respected, as in the case of the Costa Ricans who were building the Canada Line. We have seen it with seasonal pilots who were not Canadian pilots who were not getting to move up the ladder when they were well trained to do the job. We have heard this from people in my riding over and over. The mining workers are another example. There are areas where bona fide temporary foreign workers are coming in and are still facing problems and the government is not ensuring that the rules and regulations are being followed.

It is beautiful to read on the website. There are clear rules, regulations and penalties. Yet it was only by happenstance that we found that these rules and regulations have been contravened. The government has not been monitoring and evaluating the program and is not going after the people who are breaking the rules and penalizing them.

It is so important that we get this out in the open. It is so important that the committee be set up and that the NDP and everyone decides that it is an important part of what the government likes to talk about, but never does, which is transparency and accountability to the taxpayer. It is accountability to Canadian workers who are losing their jobs so rapidly and having their jobs and skills taken away in this particular economic climate. There has to be some loyalty to our own citizens.

• (1155)

The minister has announced an annual review. She said that she would do an internal review. Here is a good example. Six months ago, when the Chinese worker problem occurred with the miners in British Columbia, the minister said that she would do a review. There has been no review. We do not know what is going on with it. In the interim, in that six months, RBC has broken the rules.

We cannot trust the Conservative government when it says that it will do an internal review. It has not done it. We need the open process of consultation and hearing witnesses and travelling. We need to find out the reality of what has been happening on the ground.

Business of Supply

I hope that the House will vote for the motion. I hope that when the quasi-parliamentary committee starts up, it will function the way parliamentary committees are supposed to function. I hope that it will be open and transparent and that the recommendations that come from witnesses will be brought forward in good faith. I hope that the seven members of the committee will not block it, as they have a tendency to do.

The government must take responsibility for what has happened with the temporary foreign worker program. It must take responsibility for all of the problems it is facing and for the anger of Canadian workers and Canadian taxpayers about the mismanagement of this program. The Conservatives must take responsibility for their ability to be accountable and transparent. If they really take those things seriously, I hope members across the way will vote for transparency and accountability.

Mr. Jamie Nicholls (Vaudreuil—Soulanges, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the NDP has called for a review of this program before, and the Liberals balked.

I have been talking with pilots in my riding since 2011, and they want us to act. They do not want more hot air. They do not want more MPs travelling around the country. They want us to act here in their interests.

Liberals have balked before. They fell asleep at the switch when they were the official opposition. Now that they have flip-flopped on this position, how can Canadians possibly trust them to review this program responsibly?

Hon. Hedy Fry: Mr. Speaker, the NDP is playing politics, while we are trying to get accountability and build a nation here. What can I say?

Now that this information has come to light, we are seeing that the program has doubled since 2012, when the NDP were the official opposition.

The fact that the Liberals did not jump as soon as the NDP spoke is not a good enough reason for letting the public down and for telling Canadians that we are not going to do it now because we are pouting. I hope that the NDP will support this particular committee, if they really meant it when they said that they wanted something to be done.

Let us get on with it. This is what we are doing. Neither of us is in government. We can and should get accountability and transparency.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, there are abuses of the temporary foreign workers program. Apparently I seem to be the only party in the House that actually thinks that the whole program is wrong. I have heard the official opposition say that it does not mind the whole program and that there are ways it can be used appropriately. The committee being proposed by the Liberal Party will examine how to make it work better.

Is there not some possibility that we can study whether there is something wrong with the idea of bringing people here to work at lower wages than what Canadians will accept? We are undercutting the whole job market for Canadians. We are filling jobs that could be filled by Canadians. We are also creating downward pressure on

Canadian wages by even imagining that we should bring people to Canada, give them no rights, and have them work for cheaper wages.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Mr. Speaker, the member asked a very good question.

I want to point out to the hon. member that this program has been going on for quite a while, but it is now being abused. The program stipulated that temporary foreign workers had to be protected. They had to work at the same wage as a Canadian would be paid to do that job, and they had to obey the labour practices and the laws of the province with regard to the labour market. This was very clear.

It is only under the Conservative government that temporary foreign workers have been exploited and treated as indentured labour. This is something new, and that is why we want to get to the bottom of what is going on. We want to see the data. We want to see how many people have been exploiting and misusing the program. The Conservative government does not seem to care one way or the other. Let us not throw the baby out with the bath water. The program is important for productivity where the Canadian workforce does not have the skills and where there are jobs Canadians do not wish to do. It has always been there to help us be productive and meet our needs.

The ability of a temporary foreign worker to be fast-forwarded to become a citizen of this country and get permanent resident status was an important part of the program. The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration has decided that he does not want that anymore. He just wants people to come in and go out, back and forth. He does not want to give them the ability to come here and have a chance for a better life.

● (1200)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, there was actually a fairly simple process under the original design of the program that was being administered for many years. If employers wanted to hire foreign workers, they were obligated to advertise, pay the going rate and so forth. There was a sense of accountability to ensure that Canadians would be the first afforded the opportunity to get the jobs. However, if there were no Canadians available to take the jobs, there was a program that assisted industries from coast to coast to identify potential employees outside of Canada. At the end of the day, both would win. The program itself just needs to be fixed.

My concern is, whether it is the New Democrats or the Conservatives, that we recognize the value of the program and just fix it. The best way to fix it is to reach out to the different provinces and other stakeholders and find out what they have to say about how the program could be tuned to bring it into the next decade plus.

I wonder if the member might want to provide comment on that.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Mr. Speaker, my hon. colleague has stated the points very clearly. It is obvious that the temporary foreign worker program is valuable, but it is obvious that it needs to work very differently.

Business of Supply

The member pointed out that it used to be that, if any company wanted to hire a temporary foreign worker, it had to show it could not find a Canadian to fill the job. It had to advertise, it had to be a skill that Canadians lacked and the company had to be desperate to find that labour market person in order to get its business going. That has not happened under the Conservative government. It has just allowed companies to bypass the whole process, where they are supposed to advertise and prove they actually need these workers because Canadians would not take the jobs, or because Canadians lacked the skills.

That burden of proof is gone now. We are just left with: “Get temporary foreign workers in the door and out the door as quickly as possible. We don't really care what you do with them when they come here and we don't really care why they come here”. That is what we are trying to flush out and fix.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I heard a number of statements made today that are just patently false. The government is not allowing any companies to bypass the rules. That is simply not true.

If the Royal Bank of Canada, for example, advertised to hire people, I think it would be inundated with applications. However, what has happened here is an egregious case where something underhanded and wrong has happened.

I would propose an idea to the member. The government has indicated it will be reviewing the system. It is reviewing it as we speak. However, for companies like Canadian banks, for example, for areas where they are guaranteed almost a monopoly-type dominance of the marketplace, should they be allowed to hire temporary foreign workers? I suggest that, in this case, Canadian banks should not be allowed to hire temporary foreign workers. Period.

If we look at other industries, for example telecommunications and areas where companies are provided universal access to the Canadian market and where foreign companies are prohibited from competing with them, maybe they should not be hiring temporary foreign workers when they have guaranteed access to the Canadian market where others are prevented from accessing the Canadian market. I would be interested to hear the member's comments on that.

•(1205)

Hon. Hedy Fry: Mr. Speaker, it sounds as if the hon. member might actually vote for our motion after all. That is exactly what we are trying to do. We are trying to get to the bottom of this.

How could what happened at RBC happen? What about the Chinese miners? That has been going on and the government was meant to review it six months ago and never did. What about the Costa Ricans who were paid half the wages of European workers? What about that? That happened in 2008. That is not yesterday. What about the junior pilots program that is at risk here because we are hiring temporary foreign pilots to break that program? This has all been going on for three years.

It is easy to pass the blame. It is easy for the government to say it is going to do a review and then not do it, as the government has

done. It is easy to say it will do internal reviews. None of this has happened and we now can no longer trust the government to manage a program properly.

Therefore, we are saying let us get the House of Commons to set up a committee, to do it openly and transparently. If there is nothing that the government has to hide, everything will all come out and then it should be patted on the back.

What are the Conservatives afraid of? Let us just get this thing out on the table.

Mr. Blaine Calkins (Wetaskiwin, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will advise you at the start of my remarks that I will be splitting my time with the hon. member for St. Catharines, who does an excellent job with this file as parliamentary secretary.

I am pleased to take this opportunity to address the motion put forward by the member for Cape Breton—Canso regarding the temporary foreign worker program. First, let me very clear. The original intent of this program was to help employers find temporary help in cases where there are absolute and acute labour shortages. As a member of Parliament from Alberta, I know all too well about labour shortages.

The media reports regarding the program of late are concerning, and we are investigating to ensure that the program is working to fulfill its original purpose. We have committed in the budget to fixing the program to ensure that Canadians always have the first crack at available jobs. On the subject of the budget, I would like to speak to the current state of our economy because this has always been and continues to be, of course, this party's top priority.

Canada has fared well despite the current global economic challenges. We have the strongest job creation record in the G7. Thanks to the strong leadership of our Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, Canada has seen the creation of more than 900,000 net new jobs since the darkest days of the recession, most of which are full time private-sector jobs.

As the economy continues to grow, the demand for workers whose skills are in demand will also increase. In some regions, the demand for certain skills has skyrocketed, which results in labour shortages in key occupations that are important to our economy and to our future prosperity. This mismatch oftentimes presents a challenge for employers, workers and, of course, government. That is why I was very pleased to read the human resource committee's report on skill and labour shortages. This work has already been concluded. The report that involved the committee travelling across the country to engage directly with Canadian businesses contained some excellent testimony on the challenges these employers face.

Business of Supply

In fact, the member for Cape Breton—Canso was a member of the committee during the study and participated in the hearings, where businesses communicated precisely the ways in which the temporary foreign worker program is helping them address these challenges. I raise this because the motion today proposes to set up a special committee to examine an issue that the human resources committee is already empowered to study and has already heard the concerns of Canadian businesses and workers alike about the growing skills mismatch. This study, as well as other pre-budget consultations, was part of the reason we focused so heavily on skills and training in the recent budget. Through economic action plan 2013, we are taking a multifaceted approach to addressing labour market shortages and mismatches.

To start with, economic action plan 2013 invests significantly in skills and training to ensure that all Canadian workers, especially those currently sitting on the sidelines, are qualified to play an active part in Canada's economic growth. We are also increasing support to groups that are currently under-represented in the job market. These include youth, Canadians with disabilities, aboriginals and newcomers to Canada. We want to ensure that every Canadian can find a place in the job market, because Canadian employers need every last one of them.

Most notably, budget 2013 includes a new Canada jobs grant that would provide up to 130,000 Canadians a year with \$15,000 to retrain, \$5,000 of which would come from the federal government. Provinces and employers would also be expected to match that contribution. As the Minister of Finance said, for the first time the Canada job grant would take the skills training choices out of the hands of government and put them where they belong: in the hands of job creators and Canadians who want to work. Most importantly, the new grant should lead to one essential thing for unemployed or underemployed Canadians: a new or better job.

We are continuing to invest in reducing barriers to accreditation for apprentices. We will also reform procurement practices to encourage contractors to employ apprentices on federal construction and maintenance projects. Lastly, to make maximum use of the education and talents of recent graduates, we will invest \$70 million over three years to support 5,000 more paid internships for recent post-secondary graduates.

However, we recognize that in some parts of the country there are skills and labour that are needed and cannot be found by local businesses. This is very true in my riding and this is why temporary foreign worker programs exist: to help employers find temporary help in cases where there are absolute and acute labour shortages.

Indeed, the member for Cape Breton—Canso himself acknowledges the importance of this program as he has previously penned letters in support of bringing in temporary foreign workers. The member is joined by members of the Liberal Party, such as his colleagues from Sydney—Victoria, Winnipeg North, Random—Burin—St. George's and Mount Royal. Even the NDP, despite its rhetoric, has had an impressive number of members write in support of this program, including their House leader and even one of their deputy leaders.

● (1210)

It is quite clear that this is a program that has broad support from across party lines. This program allows employers to hire foreign workers on a temporary basis to fill immediate skills and labour shortages when Canadian citizens and permanent residents are not available to do the job.

The program plays a critical role in meeting the short-term needs of business in dire need of workers, and I would like to emphasize the notion of dire need. The temporary foreign worker program was designed and should only be used by employers as a last resort.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the media reports concerning the program of late have been very concerning and the government is investigating to ensure it is running as it should.

Our government has committed to ensuring that Canadians always have the first crack at available jobs. Canada's economic action plan 2013 has emphasized that going forward we will work with employers to ensure that temporary foreign workers are only called on when Canadians genuinely cannot fill those jobs.

We will expect companies to increase their recruitment efforts to hire Canadian workers before they will be eligible to apply for temporary foreign workers. For instance, they will need to increase the length and reach of advertising about job openings, and we will restrict the identification of non-official languages as job requirements for hiring through the temporary foreign worker process.

I would like the House to take note that CIBC World Markets reported in December 2012 that 30% of businesses in this country are facing a skilled labour shortage. The Canadian Federation of Independent Business stated in its business barometer report that 34% of small and medium-sized companies identified skills shortages as a constraint on their growth.

To meet these demands and to further our economic recovery, our government is increasing support for skills training and apprentices. At the same time we are focusing on creating job opportunities for those facing greater barriers to the labour force, such as youth, aboriginal peoples and people with disabilities.

We recognize the need to make sure every Canadian has the opportunity to fully contribute to the Canadian economy. Our economic action plan is continuing to improve Canada's economic growth and long-term prosperity.

Business of Supply

Throughout this time of economic growth, we will ensure Canadians get the first crack at all available jobs here at home. Instead of voting against investing in skills for Canadians, the opposition should support our economic action plan. I would encourage all members of this House to recognize that the time for talk is done, and to support concrete actions to improve the temporary foreign worker program.

For these reasons, I will not be voting in favour of this motion. The work has already begun. I thank the House for taking this time to hear me. I would be happy to answer any questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Marc-André Morin (Laurentides—Labelle, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to put a question to a colleague from Alberta. I think it is very relevant.

Does he think that selling Nexen's interests to a Chinese state-owned company will lead to significant investments in Alberta?

We all know what the reality is—that is, the serious labour shortage in Alberta—but perhaps my colleague could confirm the situation.

Will the decision to approve that transaction not create a demand for tens of thousands of temporary foreign workers?

• (1215)

[*English*]

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Speaker, it does not matter if it is Nexen or any particular employer, and it does not matter if it is in the energy sector.

What the NDP fails to understand is that Alberta is an economic engine. I believe it remained the only have-province throughout the economic downturn we had in Canada, and it is continuing to grow. In my riding the most common sign we see is “help wanted”. I have employers, virtually in every sector, whether it is agricultural, oil and gas or service, coming to me and saying that they cannot get Canadians to do the job. They go through the LMO process, a process that vets, verifies and substantiates the fact that qualified Canadians are not able to do the job. They then go and seek temporary foreign workers to help fill that particular void.

Whether it is Nexen or any other oil sands company, there will be tens of thousands of new jobs created in Alberta and across this country. The entire supply chain for the oil sands and all of the energy activity that happens in Alberta is shared across this country, as are all of the economic benefits. We are going to need skilled workers.

I would just like to highlight to my hon. colleague that is not just the folks who have welding certificates or who are engineers or technologists. For every one of those jobs that is created there is an unskilled or semi-skilled job created in the service industry, whether it is serving coffee, cleaning a hotel or doing any of those other kinds of jobs, and there are not enough people in Alberta to currently fill those jobs.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, surely the member would recognize that we have 338,000-plus temporary foreign workers. That is a record high. Just last year, the government pushed the delete button on immigration for the skilled

workers class and deleted literally 300,000-plus skilled workers from abroad.

There seems to be a contradiction in government policy. The Conservatives play up temporary workers, yet they hit the delete button on the skilled workers abroad who are trying to immigrate to our country.

Does the member believe that individuals who are good enough to work in Canada should also be good enough to ultimately land in Canada, to become permanent residents in Canada if they meet certain criteria?

Mr. Blaine Calkins: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should know that owing to the backlog created through years and years of neglect by the previous Liberal government, there was no other way to deal with that issue. The absolute hypocrisy of that member and his party is unbelievable. In fact, I am shocked that this motion has been brought forward by a Liberal.

Minor consequential amendments to the employment insurance program to encourage Canadians to get a job brought frustration and yelping and whining from the other side, a 45-day work year proposed by the NDP and now, all of a sudden, those members are wondering why we need temporary foreign workers in Canada. It is a ridiculous juxtaposition. It is hypocrisy at its highest.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for the opportunity to participate in this debate regarding the temporary foreign worker program. However, I would argue that this debate would benefit from less rhetoric and more facts.

The fact is that our Conservative government remains focused on job creation, economic growth and long-term prosperity. Canadians have seen concrete results thanks to the actions that we have taken. Our job growth remains the best among all G7 countries. We created over 900,000 net new jobs. Over 90% of these jobs are full-time and close to 80% of them are in the private sector. Both the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have said that Canada is at the head of the pack for economic growth in the years ahead.

The Liberals and the NDP can keep putting motions like this forward, which completely ignore the facts and completely ignore the actions our government has taken, but Canadians see and they know better.

Our government is committed to helping even more Canadians secure employment, which is why we have made significant investments in skills training. For example, in economic action plan 2013 we introduced the new Canada job grant, which was praised by a wide variety of organizations and stakeholders from across the country. Matching the needs of employers with the training Canadians are getting is key to our future economic growth. The Canada job grant will transform the way Canadians receive training.

Business of Supply

For the first time, the Canada job grant will take skills training choices out of the hands of government and put them where they belong: in the hands of employers and Canadians who want to work. Job seekers will train at community colleges, career colleges, polytechnic institutes, union training halls, among others. The Canada job grant will benefit hundreds of thousands of Canadians from one side of the country to the other.

Our government is also investing to expand and extend the temporary hiring credit for small business for one year in recognition of the important role that small businesses play as job creators in the Canadian economy.

I will acknowledge that the opposition parties talk a good game, but we know that actions speak louder than words. Both the Liberals and NDP have voted against every one of the policies we put in place to help Canadians across the country get work. The fact that they are ignoring Canadians and experts by voting against the Canada job grant speaks louder than any of the MP rhetoric we are hearing today.

By opposing economic action plan 2013, the opposition is ignoring the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters that said our plan “is very good news for companies creating jobs in Canada”.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce stated that the budget is “a significant step forward in the federal government’s attack on Canada’s skills challenge”.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities said, “it will spur growth and job creation while laying the foundation for a more competitive economy”.

The Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association said, “CRFA welcomes action to bring more accountability to skills training programs and to help employers recruit and train Canadians that are under-represented in the labour force”.

That is just a small sample of highly regarded organizations that agree that economic action plan 2013 will help grow the economy, create jobs and improve skills training to get more Canadians into the labour force. Unfortunately, if it were up to the opposition, none of these investments, ideas or concepts would actually move forward.

If the Liberals and NDP had even sat down to read to the budget before deciding to vote against it, they would have noticed that it also included several improvements to the temporary foreign worker program.

Mr. Jack Harris: Now, now.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Perhaps the member across the way could quote to me the two pages where we talk about the temporary foreign worker program in the budget. If he has read the budget, I am sure he can stand up in opposition and tell me on which two pages we refer to it.

The foreign workers program is going to ensure Canadians have first crack at available jobs and ensure employers are doing more to recruit and train Canadians for jobs. In short, changes are being made to ensure the temporary worker program is being used only as

it is intended: to fill clear and acute labour shortages on a temporary basis across our country.

I cannot understand how the Liberals, and as the member who spoke earlier indicated, can put forward a motion like this, yet at the same time vote against the very changes that will actually improve the program.

• (1220)

The government is conducting a thorough review of it and the economic action plan outlines some of the changes that would be made, for example, working with employers to ensure that temporary foreign workers would be relied upon only when Canadians genuinely could not fill these jobs. Economic action plan 2013 requires employers to increase their recruitment efforts to hire Canadians before they will be eligible to even apply for temporary foreign workers. The government will also help employers who legitimately need to make use of the program to formulate plans to transition to a Canadian workforce over time. There is not a company in the country that does not want to hire Canadians. Companies want to hire Canadians, but Canadians are just not there to fill those jobs. This is in addition to other improvements that were announced in previous budgets, which, coincidentally, the opposition also voted against.

We are introducing robust monitoring and compliance measures to ensure that employers are living up to their commitments with respect to wages, working conditions and investments in training for Canadians. The measures will allow for inspections of employers, including site visits, to verify their compliance with program requirements.

In addition to the economic action plan commitments, there will be more changes coming to the temporary foreign worker program, as we continue to consult with workers, employers, unions, migrant rights workers and Canadians across the country.

The opposition's hypocrisy on this issue is not just found in its shameful voting record. It can also be found in the fact that while it stands here today to debate the motion, several of the members of Parliament in the opposition from both parties have written to us asking us to expedite temporary foreign worker visas. Those members come from every region across the country, even some locations with high unemployment rates. Opposition members have also asked that we reverse negative decisions from the department, even when the department finds that Canadians should be able to do the work, or to give expedited processing to temporary foreign workers. The opposition members still come to the government, to the minister and to me to ask, verbally and in writing, if we can assist in reversing a decision that would bring a temporary foreign worker to their very riding.

I cannot stress enough that the government is focused on ensuring, whenever possible, that Canadians are getting first crack at any available jobs and that employers are given the tools they need to match Canadians up with labour market needs in their respective industries. We are also making investments in skills training to help unemployed and underemployed Canadians get back into the workforce.

Business of Supply

If the Liberal Party and the NDP actually cared about the issue and were serious about the motion that they presented and that we are debating today, they would not be voting against new investments in job training. They would not be voting against the major reforms to the temporary foreign worker program that would ensure Canadians would get access to jobs first.

It is clear. We have laid out a strategy. We have been working on the temporary foreign worker program since we became the government. We have gone across the country. I have been in every province to discuss and listen to and hear from workers and those involved in the industry, from small to large businesses, from agriculture to manufacturing to technology. Indeed, there are times when Canadians are not able to fill the positions, but these businesses, whether they are small or large, require assistance to bridge that gap. That is exactly what the temporary foreign worker program is.

For the most part, it is not a pathway to citizenship or permanent residency. It is simply an economic tool that has enabled companies across the country to fulfill their mandate in terms of jobs and production and to keep them aggressive on the international front and within their own communities.

I will end by reading from page 84 of the budget:

The Government will take action to reform Canada's Temporary Foreign Worker Program to ensure that Canadians are given the first chance at available jobs.

• (1225)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the member might be able to indicate something when we look at the number of 338,000 temporary foreign workers that are in Canada.

I appreciate the role the member plays with the current Minister of Immigration. He says that the Conservatives have been studying and looking at this program virtually since the first day they took office. That 338,000 is a hard number for Canadians to adjust to. Even when the economy was doing exceptionally well, when the Liberal Party was in government, it never exceeded 160,000.

What is the future? Does the member believe the number will continue to grow under the Conservative administration? Do you see that the number going down? More importantly, do you see a role for other programs to fill that labour gap?

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. Before I go to the parliamentary secretary, I once again remind all hon. members to direct their comments and questions to the Chair rather than to their colleagues. I know this point was raised earlier this morning by the Deputy Speaker. There is a reason for this rule, and I urge all hon. members to comply with it. Failure to do so will cause the Chair to interrupt you in your question, and you will not be able to put it forward.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Mr. Speaker, I know the member for Winnipeg North is a critic at the citizenship and immigration committee. We see each other every Tuesday and Thursday morning, sometimes even more than that. I know that he may not appreciate that. On occasion there are times when I appreciate his interventions,

and there are many other times when I do not. At the same time, perhaps it is better to respond with a question for the member.

The question is this: do we want a strong Canadian economy? Do we want a strong economy and low unemployment in the member's very riding of Winnipeg North? When he asks for expedited temporary foreign worker applications, when he asks for those decisions that have been denied to be reversed, is he standing up for the program, is he standing up for his constituents and does he actually believe the program is very necessary in this country to build a stronger economy?

• (1230)

Mr. Yvon Godin (Acadie—Bathurst, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I have a question for my colleague and I am ready to give him the document. Here is a Service Canada job advertisement, job search safety advice. Here in the job posting, there is a requirement in Alberta for 100 jobs for scaffolders. The skill requirements state that education is not required. In terms of credentials, a certificate, licence, membership, courses, et cetera, are not required. For years of experience, it states "five years or more".

The language requirement is to speak English. Well, we are in Alberta, so it is not going that badly. That's where I have a little bit of a question. For other languages, it lists Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Spanish, but no French at all. After that, under "Other Information", it says that the job does not require workers to speak English in remote camp locations.

There is a problem with that job posting on the Service Canada site and with Immigration Canada. You can see their posting. It says five years of experience. It says you do not need to have education and you do not need to have a certificate, yet we say we want our Canadians to have jobs. Did you know that learning to be a scaffolder takes only 11 weeks? Does he think there is a problem in Alberta when the people of New Brunswick—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. Once again, I ask hon. members to direct their questions to the Chair and not to directly address—

Mr. Yvon Godin: Sorry. I should have listened to you a few minutes ago.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Right.

The hon. parliamentary secretary.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Mr. Speaker, I know that when I have a chance to speak in the House, some of the folks on the other side like to debate directly with me. They need to understand that they need to go through you, and I respect your interventions in that regard.

One of the difficulties we face in this country is our geography. People need to understand that one part of the country may have a stronger need for a particular type of workforce and that other parts of the country may be able to supply that particular workforce. I say to the member opposite that the way to solve this problem is to have Canadians fill these jobs.

Business of Supply

If the member is suggesting to me—through you, Mr. Speaker—that there is a way to partner New Brunswick and Alberta together to deliver on these jobs, to deliver New Brunswick folks who would love to work in that industry and allow them to do so for a period of time in Alberta, then I welcome the member's ability to say that this is the way to put Canadians to work.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise with pleasure to support a motion that should receive the support of all members of the House.

I must say I am a little discouraged by comments coming from both the New Democrats and the Conservatives. Hopefully after listening, they might readjust their thinking on the issue.

The parliamentary secretary put forward a question about the bigger picture of Canada and whether we want to see Canada do well. Let there be no doubt that the Liberal Party has demonstrated over years of governance that immigration, as a policy, plays a very important role in Canada's future economic prosperity, not to mention the potential goal of enhancing the social fabric in which we all live.

I want to draw a comparison between a Liberal government and a Conservative government. The numbers are very telling: 338,000. This is a number I have repeated three or four times today. Is it really necessary for Canada to have 338,000 temporary foreign workers? I would argue that the answer is no, that there is no need for Canada to have 338,000 temporary foreign workers.

What we need to do is develop immigration programs that will be effective, that will work. Let me give a specific example. I would argue that one of the most successful immigration programs in the last 15 years was the provincial nominee program. It was an economic program for all provinces that allowed them to identify anyone in the world they would like to come to Canada and fill an economic need.

Former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien signed it off, and former Premier Gary Filmon from Manitoba came to the table relatively quickly. Manitoba saw a good thing at the time, back in 1998, and it signed up very quickly. Not only did we sign up, we made a commitment to grow with that program, because Manitoba saw the benefits of economic immigrants coming to our province. Because of that particular program, the nominee program, our immigration numbers skyrocketed. They went from an average of 3,500 or 4,000 to 12,000 to 14,000.

We can take a look at the economic benefits that the province of Manitoba has generated over the years of this hugely successful program and compare it to the temporary worker program. I have.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration says to show him some facts. Let me give him some facts: in 2008 Manitoba had 5,294 individuals on temporary work permits, and today it has 5,572. It has actually gone down or been consistent. Why has it been consistent? It is because we have taken advantage of a great national program called the nominee program.

Now we see other provinces trying to duplicate what Jean Chrétien and Gary Filmon came to an agreement on back in the late nineties and trying to take advantage of that economic program.

Today Manitoba's fear is that Ottawa will not give us the certificates we require to continue to have the success we have had in the past.

That is why I say it is time for the government to look at this resolution. We need to go to different communities, listen to what the stakeholders are saying and hear what not only the government but the business communities or the labour unions in Manitoba have to say about it. It has been a huge success.

We did not need to dramatically increase the number of temporary foreign workers; we were able to provide individuals who were prepared to come to work in Manitoba the opportunity to immigrate to Manitoba. That provided economic prosperity to our province. It played a critical role in family reunification and enhanced the multicultural fabric of our communities.

It is the same principle, and it is not just Manitoba. Other provinces are acting on the nominee program. More than ever before, the demand for certificates continues to grow.

● (1235)

The government's response to that growth: no. Sure, the government has increased it over the years, but it has to realize that the drive for the growth of the program has to come from the provinces.

When Jean Chrétien and the minister of immigration created the program, we anticipated that it would grow, and we were right. The government refuses to recognize the valuable contributions that the program could continue to make to all provinces in Canada. If we had acted on that, the need to have 338,000 foreign temporary workers in Canada today would not be there.

Through the decades we have recognized the role of immigration in our country. Pierre Trudeau brought in the live-in caregiver program. We have the temporary program we are talking about today, which was brought in through the Liberal administration. I just made reference to the nominee program. These are all programs that make a difference and allow us to meet the needs of our labour force while at the same time contributing in other ways.

What about the policy of the government? This minister has been a disaster. The minister of immigration has not done a good job, contrary to what he might like to say.

The government says that the Liberals created a huge backlog in the waiting list. Should I remind the minister of immigration that he created the largest bulk in the shortest time period in the skilled worker class when he introduced MI1? I believe it was well over 150,000 in just a few months.

What was the minister's solution with respect to the 500,000 skilled workers who were hoping to immigrate to Canada at some point and had been waiting for years? It was to hit the delete button and to continue to issue more temporary work permits.

Business of Supply

We recognize that temporary work permits do have a role to play in Canada. That is why we support the program's coming into being and its expansion, but we do not support the use of the program to the degree that it could hurt the Canadian economy. We have to offer people living in Canada, Canadians and permanent residents, the first opportunity to gain employment. The way to do that is to put into place a process that allows that to take place.

If employers at McDonald's wanted to hire foreign workers, they would typically go to the human resources office and say that they have been trying hard to hire someone in Canada but have been unsuccessful, and they would request an LMO. The answer should be "no", because before asking for one, they have to demonstrate that they have met certain criteria, such as advertisements, in attempting to fill those jobs at the restaurant. If, among other things, they were able to demonstrate that they have advertised and no one showed up to fill those jobs, then they would be issued an LMO, which would then give them the authority to go abroad and have someone brought into Canada.

● (1240)

Many would argue that in terms of the skill set for McDonald's restaurants, there are many hundreds, if not thousands, of students or individuals aged 55 and over who are looking for that type of part-time job. It would be tough to convince my constituents that McDonald's really requires temporary foreign workers.

Staying with the restaurant industry, what about a specialty cook? I remember years ago the efforts I had to go through to assist a restaurant to acquire a foreign worker. The restaurant is somewhat unique, because the cooks have to know how to make Indo-Canadian sweets. They have to know how to cook cuisine that is quite foreign to 99% of the population. It can be very difficult to acquire a specialty cook in certain situations. How the economy is performing will often have an impact. There could be a restaurant where there is a justified need, and if the restaurant does not get the cook, it ends up closing down.

That is just one industry. We have industries from coast to coast that need to have temporary foreign workers. That is why the Liberal Party supports the program. Take a look at our agriculture industry. You can talk about the Atlantic region and the fishing industry, strawberries and other industries and go west all the way to B.C. There is a huge demand. If we did not have access to temporary foreign workers, those jobs would go unfilled, and many of those jobs would then be lost forever. Those jobs contribute to our GDP. If we do not value those jobs, our lifestyle today will go down, because we are not talking about two, three or four jobs, we are talking about tens of thousands of jobs.

When the Liberal Party was in government, we had 160,000 of those jobs, but we balanced that with other programs that allowed for immigration, such as the provincial nominee program, which allowed provinces to get into the picture. I was shocked yesterday when I heard the leader of the official opposition stand up in his angry way and say that 340,000 of those foreign workers are taking 40% of the 900,000 jobs that were created. That is wrong. The Leader of the Opposition needs to get more research done on this issue. This is too important. I would assume that the critic for immigration will talk to him and explain the valuable role this

program plays for all Canadians. Not only is there a benefit for the foreign worker coming to Canada, but there is equal or greater benefit for Canada.

That is why today we are trying to appeal to all sides of the House to recognize that the best thing we can do to improve the program is to not come to the table with too many predetermined ideas. I can have an open mind and come to the table and go to the province of Manitoba and find out why its need for temporary workers has not increased at all. Yet the province has done exceptionally well economically. Compared to other provinces, it has always been in the top three in terms of low levels of unemployment.

● (1245)

Immigration has played a critical role in that, but so has the temporary foreign worker program. That has been constant. Even when the Liberal Party was in government during times of the highest economic prosperity, we never exceeded 160,000, from what I understand. We believed in a balanced approach. We want Canadians who are unemployed to get first crack at filling these jobs.

We also recognize how important it is to our economy and to our social fabric that we do not lose jobs because we cannot get those jobs filled. That is the reason we have the temporary workers. They continue to contribute in a tangible way.

That is why what we are suggesting is not that much to ask for. It is a pretty straightforward motion. I will be very disappointed and quite surprised if the New Democrats do not vote for the opposition day motion. I will wait and see. Hopefully I am misinterpreting what is being said. I will be disappointed, not surprised but disappointed, if the Conservative government does not recognize the importance of this program.

The Conservatives talk about the economic action plan. Every time one of them stands up and says the word, he or she gets a gold star. The economic action plan is not going to resolve this problem. The economic action plan is a dud. At the end of the day, the only thing that plan is doing is generating a lot of jobs in the advertising industry as the government spends millions of dollars to continuously advertise something that is going to have a negative impact. This is only one component of it.

If the government wants to approach immigration and labour in a holistic fashion, why would it oppose having committee meetings where we could talk about some of these programs? Whether it is the Pierre Trudeau live-in caregiver program, which needs to have some modifications, or the Jean Chrétien provincial nominee program, or even some changes we made to the temporary foreign worker program when we were government, we need to recognize that changes have to be made periodically to improve programs.

I asked the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration what he envisions in terms of numbers. Today we have 338,000. Where would he like to see that number in five years? Is he happy with that number? Is there another way to change the formula so that Canada benefits?

I am going to suggest that there are many ways we could improve the system so that all Canadians and permanent residents would benefit, not only today but for generations to come.

Business of Supply

We can talk about the expanded skilled worker program. If people are good enough to work in Canada for an extended period of time, why are we not allowing them, under certain criteria, to land in Canada? What about those industries that are in constant need? How do we ensure that those industries are going to be there providing continual economic benefit for our country?

I thank the House for the opportunity to say a few words.

• (1250)

Mr. Dean Del Mastro (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member tends to get onto all sorts of different issues and gets sidetracked. On this issue, I am afraid that there were a couple of times when I think he lost most members in the House of Commons, because he was no longer talking about the issue of temporary foreign workers.

I want to be clear on this issue of temporary foreign workers. I have detailed a number of Liberal members who made it clear to the minister that they wanted temporary foreign worker approvals in their ridings. We know that a number of NDP members spoke to the minister about temporary foreign worker applications. We understand that sometimes there are job openings in Canada and there are no Canadians to fill them. That is the intent of the temporary foreign worker program.

What I have been trying to get across to the Liberal Party is that the reason this was in the news last week was because of an egregious example of a company that sought to take advantage of a program, the intent of which is to help the Canadian economy, assist Canadian business and grow the overall economy. This egregious example of a company taking advantage of the system should not happen, and the government has indicated that it is going to address it.

The member is on the record as having gone to the minister to seek temporary foreign workers in his riding. Why did he not mention that in his comments and speak to the fact that he agrees that the temporary foreign worker program is a good one?

• (1255)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, maybe the member can share with me the letter he is referring to.

He is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, and his lack of knowledge on the issue concerns me. He does not necessarily understand that it is not about RBC. That is an example. If that is the only reason he thinks we are debating this today, he needs to go to the PMO and get some better speaking notes. The issue is real and needs to be addressed. He makes a case as to why he should be voting for this motion. We need the Conservatives to understand that the program needs to be fixed. It is not just RBC. He needs to wake up and smell the coffee.

I can provide a copy of some notes that might give him a better understanding of the problems within the program. I challenge him to think about what this program is all about and how Canada benefits from it. If he believes that the program is good, he should support this resolution.

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I find the previous discussion a little disingenuous. The

temporary foreign worker program in Canada grew significantly under the Liberals and then doubled under the Conservatives' watch.

When I hear some of the impassioned speeches, I have to ask why Canadians should believe the Liberals are any different from the Conservatives in managing this particular file. Do the Liberals support ending the practice of allowing temporary foreign workers to be paid 15% less than Canadian citizens and permanent residents?

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is yes.

Let me say that the member really does not appreciate history. She made reference to 160,000 under the Liberal administration. Under the last Liberal administration, the economy was doing exceptionally well. The program we are talking about was a Liberal Party creation. Virtually every progressive piece of immigration policy the House of Commons has seen originated with the Liberal Party.

We do not have to take a second seat to the New Democrats. I have witnessed New Democrat after New Democrat take shots at the Liberal Party. All you need to do is reflect on your angry leader of the official opposition and some of the statements he made yesterday and some of the other statements made by New Democrats. You are not that much better than the Conservatives in terms of immigration policy. Does—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order, please. The time has expired. Also, I have been in the chair for just under an hour and this is the fifth time I have reminded members to address their comments to the Chair rather than their colleagues. This is not a shrug. I want to serve notice to members that the next time this happens in this chamber I will immediately interrupt that person and move on to the next speaker.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Beauséjour.

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I think my colleagues will agree that my colleague from Winnipeg North has done a terrific job as the spokesperson for our party with respect to citizenship and immigration issues.

The member's speech highlighted a number of concerns that our party has with respect to the temporary foreign worker program. However, my question for my colleague is very simple. Does he agree with me that there is considerable merit in having a well run, balanced temporary foreign worker program? For example, in my constituency in the seafood processing sector, many businesses depend on temporary foreign workers who come and live in small rural coastal communities in Atlantic Canada. They contribute a lot to the communities themselves and a great deal to the businesses in which they work.

It is important to have a labour market opinion that is an accurate reflection of the labour market and companies need to be prevented from abusing this program. However, does the member agree with me that done properly, particularly in rural and remote communities and some sectors like tourism and seafood processing, there is a real role for a temporary foreign worker program in assisting these businesses?

Business of Supply

•(1300)

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, the key words there are “done properly”. A program for temporary foreign workers, done properly, can make a difference and have a real impact on Canada's economy in a very strong and positive way.

The member makes reference to an industry in Atlantic Canada which is of critical importance. It drives many benefits for Canadians from coast to coast to coast. The products and produce that come from the seafood industry in Atlantic Canada are well known. Those temporary foreign workers provide a valuable service and that principle can be applied throughout the country.

If the program is administered properly, we will find great economic opportunities for Canada. We all benefit when that happens. However, we have to ensure that the program is administered properly so we do not have a situation where there are unemployed Canadians who have the ability to fill jobs but are denied those jobs because an employer wants to have a foreign worker. There needs to be a balance.

The program is great, it is wonderful and we need to protect its integrity, but it has to be administered properly.

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in Toronto over half the population was born outside of the city and they are listening to this debate with great concern. It is important to underline that in this debate when we are tackling the issues we do so with the principles of justice and fairness for all workers in Canada first and foremost. It is very important that we underline that fact.

In Toronto about one-third of the temporary foreign workers are being deployed. This defies mathematics. For example, between 2000 and 2005 we brought in about 45,000 immigrant workers who were professional engineers. They need these jobs.

Therefore, the system is broken. Could my colleague speak to those issues? There are egregious mistakes in this program.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, the member brings up a good point in the sense that we need to recognize there are provincial laws and regulations, labour codes and so forth. All of those provincial laws do apply to foreign workers. Nowhere in Canada should there be anyone receiving less than the provincial minimum wage or have to work outside of normal hours without getting that time and a half and so forth.

We have to ensure that there are some basic standards. It would be nice, if we see this resolution pass, that a number of other important factors would also be brought to the table. We have to ensure we protect the rights of the worker at the same time as we continue to have this dialogue on this very important issue.

•(1305)

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Mississauga—Streetsville today.

I am pleased to be here to speak to the motion on temporary foreign workers.

First, let me echo the comments of my colleagues that we are concerned about some of the recent matters highlighted in the media

as of late. It is unequivocally unacceptable for Canadian companies to be laying off Canadians to replace them with foreign workers. I think that is something with which all members of the House would agree. As the minister has made clear in her statement on this matter, HRSDC officials are reviewing the matter.

In budget 2013, we committed as a government to make several changes to strengthen the temporary foreign worker program. Canadians must always have the first crack at any available job. We have been consistent on that position with the program.

Our government's focus from day one of this mandate has been on jobs, economic growth and long-term prosperity. Connecting Canadians with available jobs has been our mission. Through the expanded job alerts program, unprecedented funding for work sharing and skills training during the recession and targeting supports for older workers through the targeted initiative for older workers, our government has consistently put Canadians first.

Among the largest industrialized countries in the world, such as the U.S., Germany and Japan, Canada has the strongest record of growth and job creation throughout this economic recovery. Since the depth of the global economic recession, the Canadian economy has created over 900,000 net new jobs. Overwhelmingly, these are full-time, well-paying jobs in the private sector. We are doing well, but we cannot afford to become complacent.

The global economy remains fragile and the United States, our largest trading partner, continues to struggle with massive debt and modest economic growth.

Canadians may legitimately ask how, in a country with 7% unemployment, there could be a shortage of qualified applicants in any job. Yet, skills and labour shortages are a reality and they are affecting the ability of Canadian businesses to grow and compete. We have a mismatch on our hands between the skills that workers have and what employers need to hire to keep their businesses running smoothly and successfully.

The Prime Minister, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, the Canadian Labour Congress, the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters and many others have called it one of the most difficult challenges Canada faces today.

Here are some more sobering statistics. When all professions are considered, it is estimated that by 2016 there will be 1.5 million skilled job vacancies in Canada. By 2021, that number will increase to 2.6 million skilled job vacancies. If we cannot find ways to fill our skills and labour gaps, we will lose ground significantly and all Canadians will suffer.

As someone from the Maritimes, I am all too familiar with those facts. In the Maritimes we now have the shipbuilding contracts coming to Halifax. We have the lower Muskrat Falls hydro project almost under way. There are going to be unprecedented opportunities for the skilled trades in my region. However, there will not be enough workers in the region to support this demand that will be there over the next decades. We need to invest now in training our workforce so people across the region can take advantage of this economic opportunity.

Business of Supply

Our government is working hard to make this happen. We have made skills and training a central pillar of economic action plan 2013. With 18 years as a professional educator, it is the first budget in my memory that has education as its centrepiece. We are ramping up our efforts to give Canadians better labour market information so they can be better prepared for the jobs that are out there. We are encouraging employers to tap into demographic groups that they may have overlooked before, such as young people, aboriginal people, people with disabilities and workers over 55. We want as many Canadians as possible working.

Recent news stories about the use of the temporary foreign workers program have once again led to confusion and concern among Canadians. These stories have revived the persistent myth that our government's temporary foreign worker program is designed to undercut Canadian workers by giving employers access to cheap foreign labour.

There is a lot at stake here, so I want to tackle the myth of cheap labour head on.

• (1310)

The temporary foreign worker program has never been intended to save money for businesses by allowing them to ignore qualified Canadian applicants for jobs in favour of foreigners who would work for less money. The program has always been about filling vacancies where there are no qualified Canadian applicants. This is the most basic principle of the program. That is why we are reviewing and reforming the program to make it work better to ensure that Canadians always have first opportunity at available jobs.

As we have said many times, employers are required to do everything reasonable to find Canadian candidates for their job openings. Only when they cannot find a qualified Canadian are they allowed to hire from outside the country.

When companies are able to get foreign workers, it actually benefits Canadian workers, because when businesses expand, there is a ripple effect and more jobs are created.

The moment temporary foreign workers arrive in Canada, they have the same rights on the job as Canadians, including the right to be paid a fair wage. It is unfortunate that there is so much information out there, with big unions telling Canadians that temporary foreign workers are paid less than Canadians. Every employer must pay a temporary foreign worker the same wage it is paying its Canadian workers for doing the same job in the same location.

As I have said before, our government is aware of the concerns Canadians have with the temporary foreign worker program. The review we have undertaken would address these concerns.

Budget 2013 announced several initiatives we are pursuing in the coming months. We will require employers to increase the intensity of their efforts to hire Canadians before we judge them eligible to get temporary foreign workers imported into the country. We will, for example, expect them to advertise over a longer period, to a wider audience, when they have jobs available.

We will help employers which currently rely on temporary foreign workers to plan for transition to an all-Canadian workforce.

We are proposing to introduce a fee for employers requesting temporary foreign workers so the Canadian taxpayer will not have to pay for these processing costs.

Our government will never stray from our commitment to strengthen the economy for all Canadians. We are going to do what it takes to ensure Canadians always have first opportunity at any available job. However, we do not need several more months of talking on the subject.

Budget 2013 has laid out concrete proposals for fixing the program. For that reason, I am asking the opposition to quit playing politics and work with us on positive solutions.

Therefore, I will not be voting for the motion. I urge all members of the House to join me in standing up for real action by voting against the motion.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I can only shake my head at the contradictions in those remarks. If anyone should understand some of the mistakes that have been made in recent times, through leaving everything up to the bureaucrats at HRSDC, that member should. He has to be experienced in terms of the problems that we are having with the EI changes that were not thought out and without having hearings by anybody. As a result, we have a disaster now for the seasonal industries and seasonal workers in his region and in my particular region.

In terms of some of the recommendations coming forward he said that there would be longer periods of time taken. How is that going to affect the agricultural workers? The agricultural businesses that depend upon these temporary workers are already complaining to me that the time frame has been tightened up too much, that they cannot regain the workers who have been on their farms for quite a number of years.

The recommendations can be put forward, but what is wrong with a committee actually going out to find out the facts and the Government of Canada allowing members of Parliament to do their job?

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Speaker, the member for Malpeque talks about contradictions in one statement or another. One of his colleagues, referring to the temporary foreign workers program, said that temporary foreign workers were an important part of our economy and some of the best workers are temporary foreign workers. Then the same member said at a later date that the temporary foreign worker program had been consistently abused as a vehicle to replace Canadian workers with foreign workers.

If anyone is making contradictory statements, it is not the members of our party. It is the members of my opposition colleague's party.

As far as bringing in agricultural workers, in my riding we have a huge agricultural base and many farmers are using temporary foreign workers. There are no changes that we will make to make lives more difficult for those farmers. What we really need is to ensure we have the skills training and the job training necessary so Canadians who can fulfill those jobs.

Business of Supply

I envisage a time in Canada where we do not need the foreign worker program because we will have more Canadians trained for the skills and jobs that are available.

• (1315)

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is important to underline the point that when we tackle this issue we do so with the principles of justice and fairness in mind for all workers in Canada: Canadian citizens, permanent residents and temporary foreign workers. That is the NDP's position. It is a position of social justice and fairness for all those who live in Canada.

What we need to underline in this debate is how the temporary foreign worker program feeds into the downward spiral of wages in this country. I have listened to members opposite talk about this program and how fantastic it is, but we have to think about what is going on in the city of Toronto with about one-third of the temporary foreign workers, upwards of 100,000 temporary foreign workers. The government says there are no skilled workers to do these jobs. Between 2004 and 2008 about 45,000 highly skilled, internationally educated engineers immigrated to Toronto. The government is telling us that there is a skills shortage in the city of Toronto. The Conservatives should take a cab in Toronto and talk to the doctors and the engineers and the scientists there.

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Speaker, I do not profess to know what is going on in the cabs in Toronto, being from a rural part of Atlantic Canada. My region needs the foreign worker program to support many businesses. Businesses have had to shut down because they cannot find available employees. We need to have a program that steps in and fills that gap. However, what we really need is to support education, training and the development of skills so that Canadians can fill available jobs. It works as a combination of our immigration system, our education system and our post-secondary education system to make sure that Canadians are trained for available jobs, whether they be in the agricultural industry or in the skilled trades in downtown cities like Toronto.

Mr. Brad Butt (Mississauga—Streetsville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government's priority is jobs, growth and long-term prosperity. That is why Canadians elected a strong, stable, Conservative majority government. Canadians understood that the economic leadership of the Prime Minister was key to navigating the difficult economic times we faced.

That trust paid off, and we have seen the creation of more than 900,000 net new jobs. Most are full-time jobs in the private sector, with over two-thirds being in high wage industries. This reflects the strength of Canada's economy amidst global economic uncertainty.

As good as these results are, however, our focus is still on getting Canadians back to work. While there are currently thousands of jobs across Canada going unfilled, there are still too many Canadians looking for work. We are confronted with mismatches in some regions between the existing skills of the local labour force and the skills that are required by employers for new jobs. This is leading to shortages in some occupations that are key to our competitiveness and continued economic growth.

As a member of the human resources committee, I have heard many employer and employee groups appear before the committee

to discuss how we can address this growing skills gap. I have also heard this from employers and employees in the great riding of Mississauga—Streetsville.

Our committee has travelled across Canada to gather testimony. We focused on apprentices, persons with disabilities and those in rural and remote parts of the country. In every one of these studies, in every corner of the country, we have heard of the growing skills mismatch and how this is a pressing issue facing our economy.

Canada's economic action plan 2013 details the government's strategy to connect Canadians with these jobs. Through our EAP, we will equip Canadians with the skills and training they need to be hired in these quality, well-paying jobs.

We announced, as an example, the creation of the Canada jobs grant, which could provide \$15,000 or more per person. This grant would shift the planning and delivery of training from government to job creators. This would directly connect Canadians who are unemployed or those looking to advance within their workplace with a job that is currently going unfilled.

We would create opportunities for apprentices by making it easier for them to get the experience they need to get to journeyperson status. We would also provide funding for 5,000 more internships for those who have recently graduated from college or university, and we would provide unprecedented support to groups that have faced barriers in the past to full labour market participation, including persons with disabilities, youth, aboriginal peoples and newcomers, so that they too can find meaningful work.

I mention these examples because I believe there is a misperception as to the intentions of the government when it comes to this program. Our government is doing everything in its power to ensure Canadians have the first crack at available jobs. We are investing in the skills of Canadians in unprecedented ways to ensure they have the qualifications to find better-paying employment.

Employers need to prove there are no Canadians available to fill a job before they can turn to foreign workers through the temporary foreign worker program. In areas of absolute and acute labour shortages, the temporary foreign worker program exists to help businesses get short-term workers to grow their businesses.

I know the opposition members appreciate the need for this program. How do I know that? At least eight NDP MPs lobbied for more TFWs in their ridings, and at least five Liberal MPs have done the same.

Business of Supply

While we can all agree that temporary foreign workers should not displace Canadian workers, it is a little hypocritical to have the opposition members across the way vilify a program in public when in private they are demanding more from it.

● (1320)

On one hand, the member for Cape Breton—Canso—

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, the member used this in his remarks, and it was tried earlier, listing eight NDP members and four Liberal members who have written letters on this issue.

Where does that information come from? Is it the spy machine of the Conservatives? There is no place for those kinds of tactics in here.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. The matter raised by the member for Malpeque is a matter of debate as opposed to a point of order.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Mississauga—Streetsville.

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, for a member who has been here a long time, one would think he would know the difference between a point of privilege and a point of order.

The member for Cape Breton—Canso was quoted as saying:

Temporary foreign workers are an important part of our economy....
...some of the best workers are temporary foreign workers.

On the other hand, the exact same member said:

...the temporary foreign worker program has been consistently abused as a vehicle to replace Canadian workers with foreign workers.

Which is it? Are TFWs an important part of our economy and some of the best workers, or is the program abused and a vehicle to replace Canadian workers with foreign workers?

Those of us on this side of the House believe that Canadians must always have the first opportunity at available jobs. It has never been the intent of the program to exist as an alternative to hiring Canadians.

Budget 2013 committed the government to fixing some of the problems that are in the program. We have committed to doing such things as increasing recruiting efforts, as well as the length and reach of advertising. We will also work with employers, when there are no qualified Canadians, to develop a plan to transition Canadian workers over time. We will restrict the language requirements for temporary foreign workers to official languages only.

Let me be clear. Hiring temporary foreign workers does not mean creating a pool of second-class labour. Employers cannot exploit or neglect their temporary foreign workers. They have to follow the rules, provide a safe work environment and ensure their well-being.

If not, they will find themselves banned from the temporary foreign worker program. These workers have the same rights and protections as all Canadian workers under applicable federal and provincial employment standards and laws. Foreign workers are registered with the workers compensation board, and they also receive private or public health care coverage, as any Canadian would receive.

A further reflection of our commitment to fairness and equity in the program is the fact that foreign workers must be paid the same wage as Canadian workers for doing the same work they do for an employer. Let me be clear on this point, as union leadership and opposition MPs have been intentionally misleading on it. Temporary foreign workers cannot be paid less than a Canadian. Employers must provide documentation to demonstrate that the wage being paid to a temporary foreign worker is exactly the same as that being paid to Canadian employees doing the same work in that region for the employer.

In conclusion, let me say that the government's focus is on helping Canadians find meaningful work. We are investing in Canadians so they can find better-paying jobs today. However, there are parts of the country where employers cannot find the labour or skills they need to grow their businesses.

I will not be supporting this motion today. The government is at it; our hard-working Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development is on the file. We will be bringing forward changes to strengthen the program and make sure the program works for the workers, for the employers and for all Canadians.

● (1325)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as former immigration minister, I was very pleased to contribute to the program. Some groups that come to mind are farmers and meat packers, particularly in Manitoba.

The government is spouting nonsense.

[*English*]

The motion raises the awareness that there is a situation. We do not want, like the NDP, to give the impression that we want to kill the program. We like the program. We invented it. However, I have a serious question. Did the member just say that all the temporary foreign workers will have to speak one of the two official languages? When we have those meat packers and people from Mexico and I remember our government signed an agreement with Guatemala, does it mean that if they do not speak English or French they cannot work? They are coming here for a temporary timeframe. I would like to understand what the member meant by that.

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, it is important for people who want to work in Canada to be able to effectively communicate in one of Canada's official languages at an appropriate level. That level may not be the full English or French language skills that most Canadians would have, but it has to be at a certain level.

Business of Supply

As a government, we are more concerned about practices which do need to be cleaned up, where it has been indicated that an individual must speak a third language, which is not one of Canada's official languages, in order to be hired to do a job. That practice will end.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Matthew Dubé (Chambly—Borduas, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I find it curious that the member continues to focus on the eight letters written by NDP members. He does not seem to understand one thing, however. It is not that we do not want foreign workers; we do not want a repeat of what happened with pilots, for example.

I am talking about the Sunwing pilots, some of whom live in my riding. They are laid off during the so-called off-season. Then, the company hires foreign pilots and pays them less. The company saves money and gives discounts to customers who want to travel south during the off-season. In the end, the company comes out ahead. It is incredibly dishonest.

We want to see improvements to the program, but it is not true that these people are making the same amount of money. I do not know how else to put it. And basing arguments on letters written by members, without understanding the context in which they were written, is obvious intellectual dishonesty.

I think that, first, the member should apologize for using this argument. Second, I would ask him to explain why a company such as Sunwing behaves the way it does, laying off Canadians and then turning around and hiring foreign workers, on the pretext that it is the off-season.

• (1330)

[*English*]

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member may be confusing programs and may have examples outside of the issue we are dealing with today, which is temporary foreign workers. He may be talking about some other type of program. I am not familiar with what he is referring to.

However, what we have committed to do in economic action plan 2013 is to take a strong, serious look at the temporary foreign worker program, make sure it is living up to its original intent of what it is designed to do and how it is designed to work, and make sure that there are not any loopholes or any other areas that would not ensure that both the workers and employers were playing by the rules.

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, to my colleague from Mississauga—Streetsville, it certainly is the case that in the British Columbia example of Chinese foreign workers who were brought in for the mine, they did not speak English or French.

My question relates to agriculture. I asked a farmer in my riding if he was using the temporary foreign worker program and he said, “No, I hire all local kids.” I said that I keep hearing that local kids will not work on farms. He said, “They will if you pay them a decent wage.”

I think the issue is how we price the work that is being done and I would like to ask my friend from Mississauga—Streetsville if we should not be willing to pay Canadian workers enough to live in Canada.

Mr. Brad Butt: Mr. Speaker, I congratulate the farmer from the member's riding of Saanich—Gulf Islands. I think that is spectacular. I have also met with employers in my riding who are having difficulty under the temporary foreign worker program getting labour market opinions approved because they are not offering the appropriate wages and are actually being denied because they are not offering the right wage levels that are commensurate with Canadian wages. My answer to those employers is they have to follow the rules. If the rules are to pay a Canadian decent wage to a temporary foreign worker just like they pay a Canadian worker, that is what the rule should be.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased to stand to speak on this motion by my colleague from Cape Breton—Canso. It is important, after this long a debate, to remind the House what the motion really is. It states, “That the House recognize that the use of temporary foreign workers to replace Canadian workers in jobs Canadians are qualified and able to do is an abuse of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program...” It goes on to state that a special committee “have all of the powers of a Standing Committee as provided in the Standing Orders, as well as the power to travel, accompanied by the necessary staff, inside and outside of Canada...”

This is a serious issue. The need to consult Canadians on the temporary foreign worker program is critical and one that the government should support if it has been honest about how the program has been working. There have been a lot of answers from the government claiming it is concerned, we heard the word “concerned” used about 20 times by Conservatives, that there will be an internal review, it is going to fix any problems, and so on. Why not show some openness and transparency? Why not allow Parliament to do its function? Why not allow MPs to do their jobs without the strings of the PMO attached to the shoulders of the backbench members on the government side?

If the government has been truthful in its remarks thus far that it has not allowed deliberate abuse of the program, then it should be the first to support this motion. We now know, though, sadly, that the government, by the remarks of the parliamentary secretary, will not support the motion. The parliamentary secretary speaks for the government. Conservative MPs stand time after time and talk about “our government”. They still do not seem to realize that they are not members of the government but members of the governing party. They are members of the House of Commons. They can speak in their own right. They could support this motion.

I hear the member for Brant squeaking a bit over there. He can stand in his own right. That would be wonderful to see. I have listened to quite a number of backbenchers and I suspect this summer there will be a cabinet shuffle. Maybe the backbenchers are vying to get into cabinet and they do not want to cross any lines. However, for the backbenchers on the Conservative side who have been speaking out there is a real opportunity here.

Business of Supply

There is a real opportunity for us to show Canadians that this place can work and that members of Parliament from all parties can do their jobs, hold hearings and, yes, have differences of opinion, but come back with recommendations for the government. If backbenchers in the Conservative Party support a recommendation in a committee, that does not mean they are undermining the government. They are making a recommendation as part a committee based on what they heard across the country for the government to do something better and the executive branch of government can reject or accept that recommendation. That is how this place is supposed to work.

What backbenchers in the Conservative Party seem to fall back on, and it obviously comes from the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, is the following:

[The] Minister...has launched a review of the temporary foreign worker program in the wake of allegations that the Royal Bank of Canada is laying off Canadian citizens for immigrant labour.

That is what they are falling back on: an internal review.

Mr. Brad Butt: Good. Great.

Hon. Wayne Easter: The member for Mississauga—Streetsville says yes.

● (1335)

Well is that not wonderful? Not only is the PMO pulling his puppet strings, but now the bureaucrats at HRSDC are telling him what to do. That is who he is going to listen to, not the people of Canada. Come on, folks in this House. We are MPs. We have a responsibility. There is a problem with a program out there. We need a special committee to go out and hold hearings and to meet business people across the country and do our job. For heaven's sake, through you, Mr. Speaker, allow the PMO to allow members of Parliament to do their job. That would be a wonderful change in this place because we have not seen it happen in all of the six years since the current Prime Minister took his seat as Prime Minister. So I am saying that this so-called review by the minister is not enough.

A lot will be said in this discussion today, for and against temporary foreign workers and why the situation is as it is. However, I want to spell out that, at least from my perspective, it is a very important program. I see the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and he knows full well how important the program is to many in the agriculture sector. Many in my province use it. It is necessary, but it needs to be balanced with the rules so that Canadians' jobs are not taken away.

I will come to another point that is important to me, and that is what has been happening in this place as I have sat here and listened to this discussion today. What is wrong with holding a committee hearing? What is wrong with us doing our job? There was a time in this place when the government members would go out and do a green paper. They would consult and get basically an initial discovery view, and there would be white papers and special committees that would go out and hear all the views from business people and so on. That is really what we need to do here. We need to hear from the people in big business and small business, some of the companies that are using temporary foreign workers, some that are rightly doing so and perhaps some that are not. We need to hear from

members of the various industries, be it agriculture, fish plants, or whatever it may be, and see what they think needs to be done.

I raised with you, Mr. Speaker, a moment ago and I raised it this morning, two separate points of order on the same issue related to what I have seen in this discussion today. Quite honestly, I find it very disgusting, what three members on the government side have said.

The member for Brampton West, got up and accused the NDP of writing somewhere around a dozen letters asking for temporary foreign workers. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister got up and accused the MP for Winnipeg North of writing a letter for a temporary worker. Just a moment ago, the member for Mississauga—Streetsville got up and said that at least eight New Democrats and at least four Liberals have written letters asking for temporary foreign workers. He says it is all true. How do we know that? Is it the Conservative spy and attack machine that is providing that information? Does every member over there on the Conservative side of the House know to whom I have written a letter in terms of the ministry? Do the Conservatives know the people who have asked me to make those requests? We know the tactics on the other side. They are divide and attack. That is what their tactics are, and the whole purpose of their even saying that the New Democrats or Liberals wrote letters is because they are trying to undermine the argument on this side. They are talking in half-truths and half-information.

This is a serious matter. It undermines the right of my constituents to have me write a letter to a minister requesting anything, and if I follow through on that letter I can expect to be attacked by the Conservative attack machine, by a backbench member who should not have the information from HRSDC or any other ministry in this country. What is happening to this Parliament?

● (1340)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs is rising on a point of order.

Mr. Dean Del Mastro: Mr. Speaker, the point of order is that any letter written by a member of Parliament to a minister is actually subject to access to information in this country. The member should be aware of it.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): That is not a point of order; it is a point of debate.

Resuming debate, the hon. member for Malpeque.

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, we know the kind of games; we know what access to information is there for. We know the directions come from the centre to find any means to undermine, to attack and to discredit. That is not what Parliament is supposed to be about.

Business of Supply

Why I am so strongly in favour of this motion of a special committee is to try to show Canadians that this place can work. We can work together as MPs. We do not have to take direction from the Prime Minister's Office. The backbench members over there do not have to take direction from the Prime Minister's Office. We could do our job, hold the proper hearings and come back with recommendations, and the cabinet could accept or reject those recommendations. That would be doing our job.

Let us understand what we are really speaking about. I may have got a little off track, but the fact of the matter is that I believe in my country. I believe in democracy and I want to see this democracy work. It is being severely undermined in this very place.

The program was initially proposed, designed and established by a previous Liberal government, but it worked then. It was not undermined. The program was established by a previous Liberal government and was initially designed to achieve a careful balance of three equally important objectives. The first was to protect the jobs and wages of Canadian workers and Canadian access to employment opportunities. The second was to assist small businesses and corporations that have legitimate—and I underline that fact—difficulties finding workers. The third objective was to protect the dignity of temporary foreign workers by ensuring they are paid a fair wage and are treated as fairly as Canadians workers doing the same work. That is what the program was really about in the beginning.

A recent article on the issue of temporary foreign workers provides a summary of why the House should support the motion here today. It was by Erin Weir, in the online *Globe and Mail*. It said:

Reports of RBC outsourcing jobs to temporary foreign workers to replace existing Canadian employees should prompt a broader debate about the massive expansion of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program in recent years. Is this program addressing genuine “labour shortages” or undermining job opportunities and wages in Canada?

A number of speakers have spoken along those lines. The article went on:

The number of temporary foreign workers in Canada has more than doubled since the Harper government took office. The Department of Citizenship and Immigration reports the presence of 338,000 temporary foreign workers at the end of 2012.

Since 2006, that is a 140% increase in temporary foreign workers in the country, from 140,000 to 338,000. It is a serious matter. Certainly, some of them are needed in some sectors, but some of it is certainly an abuse of the program, and that is the reason we should be holding hearings.

The scale of the issue should be placed in a context that is both understandable and shocking at the same time, given the current reality of unemployment and underemployment in Canada. Since 2008, the number of temporary foreign workers has increased by 24,000, or 60%, in Toronto; 18,000, or 70%, in Quebec; and 5,000, or 80%, in the Atlantic provinces. Together, these regions of high unemployment account for most of the post-recession increase in Canada's temporary foreign workforce. With the exception of Toronto, as well as Newfoundland and Labrador, wages in these regions are below the national average.

● (1345)

To put it into perspective, the temporary workforce is now almost as large as New Brunswick's entire employed labour force and far

exceeds that of Newfoundland and Labrador, not to mention Prince Edward Island. With remarkably little evidence or public consultation, the temporary foreign worker program has added the equivalent of a small province to Canada's labour market. That is how serious this issue is. It needs to be balanced in where to find and use temporary foreign workers, which is fine. However, what are the rules around those particular temporary foreign workers?

I do not want to talk about my own province because we do utilize temporary foreign workers.

In its report, the Cooper Institute stated this about how temporary foreign workers are treated:

In 2012 the federal government announced changes to the TFWP that will come into effect in 2013. One of these changes allows the TFWs to be paid up to 15% less than their Canadian co-workers, but not less than the minimum wage. Before this TFWs had to be paid the same wage as Canadians. TFWs are vulnerable in ways that most Canadian workers are not. If they issue a complaint, even to the authorities, they can be fired and sent back to their home countries.

Then there is the whole issue of housing. There is the whole issue of maybe having to pay money to a recruitment agent. As well, there is the whole issue of insecurity. These people are certainly under some pressure.

Specifically in my own province, are temporary foreign workers taking jobs from islanders? The Cooper Institute claims:

No. Before hiring TFWs, employers need to go through a process that shows they have advertised for Canadian workers, and that they didn't receive enough applications. Also, most employers of TFWs report that they still have job vacancies for any Canadians who may want to apply for work.

I have had experience with that myself, where I have had to work strenuously with the labour market opinion to allow a film crew that was working on a fairly major film to come to Prince Edward Island. They did not have the skills on the island to do it. We were able to do that.

However, it is important that there is the right balance in terms of temporary foreign workers coming in.

We all know that there are serious problems with the temporary foreign worker program. This recommendation is requesting not an absolute solution right now but rather making a recommendation that a committee go out there, do its job, meet with the business community, whether big or small, the hospitality industry, the tourism industry and the farming industry to hear what people have to say, find the problems, look at the solutions and meet with HRSDC. It would give us the opportunity to show Canadians that there is a role for MPs and that the backbench Conservatives do not have to take their direction from the PMO. Rather, they could actually work as a team of parliamentarians and go out there and work together, do the hearings, find the solutions and make recommendations.

Statements by Members

● (1350)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, back when the member opposite's party was in power, it took \$54 billion out of the employment insurance system to make it look as if it was balancing the books instead of directing that money toward skills development.

Now we have a situation where we have job availability but do not have people with the correct skills to fill those jobs.

How can the member criticize our government when his party used the temporary foreign workers program to bring in strippers and victims of human trafficking?

Hon. Wayne Easter: Oh my goodness, Mr. Speaker, what does the question have to do with finding solutions? This is what I was talking about earlier. Conservative members have to use certain talking points. We know a cabinet shuffle is coming and all those members are vying to get there. There may be a better opportunity for those who attack and divide the most. That is why we get these kinds of questions. That is why we get the seek and destroy and search Conservative attack machine finding letters that members of Parliament may have written and giving half truths and half information in terms of the remarks.

I can tell the members that the Liberal government had surplus budgets. We hit our targets, not like the Conservative government is doing.

● (1355)

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, honestly, if we are going to hear such ridiculous, half-baked questions, like the one about strippers, then I would rather hear talking points.

The member mentioned a story about those people who needed to find very skilled workers in a field that was experiencing a shortage of that kind of labour. That is precisely the situation that program is supposed to address. However, the Internet, and specifically the well-known site Kijiji, describes a very different situation.

[English]

Our company WellcarePlacements is hiring individuals who have work experience in fastfood counter attendant, to work in Mc Donald, Boston Pizza, Dairy Queen, Tim Hortons, Subways and more. You must at least have a one year work experience. Pls send your resume with picture. Air ticket is provided!!!

[Translation]

Is this not an abuse of the regulations?

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, the point that the member outlined is the reason we must as a Parliament endorse this special committee and allow it to do its work. There are many of these kinds of examples. There are bad examples in which the program is seriously being abused. The government has lowered the wage structure by a potential 15%, and that can put downward pressure on wages in this country and labour issues. I mentioned many other situations in my remarks in terms of the agriculture industry and fisheries plants where we do indeed need temporary foreign workers.

The member's question makes the argument of why Conservative members in the House should take on their responsibilities, support the motion and allow this Parliament to do its work for Canadians, not just the PMO.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, of course we will not react to what the Conservatives are doing.

Not only is this an important program, but we need to be pragmatic and recognize certain realities, particularly in the agricultural sector. I wonder if my hon. colleague from Malpeque, who was our agriculture critic in another life and knows this file very well, could explain how important it is to support this motion. The program works. It is a good, much-needed program, but we need to prevent abuse. I would like him to explain exactly why this program is so important, especially for our farmers.

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, it is an extremely important program for the farm community. People within my own community use temporary foreign workers because they cannot find workers for the vegetable industry they run.

The program is not necessarily taking jobs from Canadians. The program leverages more jobs for Canadians. Canadians work on that farm as well as temporary foreign workers. There is a spinoff from the production, the agricultural development, the trucking to the grocery stores. It makes the operation work and that is the kind of balance we need.

There are good and bad examples, as I said earlier. This committee could provide the evidence, not the rhetoric from those who want to attack immigrants as if they are taking jobs away from Canadians, which some may be doing but there are a lot who are not.

We need to find the facts and the evidence and make the recommendations to make this program work the way it was originally designed to.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time for government orders has expired. The hon. member for Malpeque will have four minutes in questions and comments remaining when this returns before the House.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

● (1400)

[English]

NATIONAL VOLUNTEER WEEK

Mr. Costas Menegakis (Richmond Hill, CPC): Mr. Speaker, next week is National Volunteer Week, a time when we celebrate the volunteers who contribute so much to our communities. I rise to give thanks to the thousands of constituents in my riding of Richmond Hill who help every day to improve the lives of others.

Statements by Members

By assisting in their place of worship, school or hospital, coaching in a sports organization, participating in a ratepayer association or community club, or simply lending a hand to their neighbours, Richmond Hill is much better off because of their generous contributions.

Groups like the Richmond Hill Social and Bocce Club, the 1st Richvale Guides, Learning Disabilities Association of York Region, Richmond Hill Community Food Bank, L'Arche Daybreak, Hill House Hospice, Richmond Hill Winter Carnival and so many others all benefit from the time, energy and skills of these selfless individuals. I salute all volunteers in Richmond Hill, and I offer my appreciation and congratulations to them and indeed to all volunteers across our great nation who help make our communities and our country the very best place in the world in which to live.

* * *

2013 BOSTON MARATHON

Mr. Matthew Kellway (Beaches—East York, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am indebted to Boston: my wife; my wedding day; Italian ice at Castle Island with the kids and grandparents; milestones and rhythms of my life, happy ones, because of a beautiful city and people with warm, generous hearts, always lovely and welcoming to this Canadian in love with one of their own. Those hearts are broken today and ours along with them.

To the families and loved ones of those injured, our hope for your recovery. To those whose hearts were silenced yesterday, including eight-year-old Martin Richard, our prayers.

I was reminded yesterday by a friend from Afghanistan that around the world, it is not terror that is rare but peace. It is a message in chalk on the sidewalk outside little Martin Richard's home in Dorchester. It is in our hearts, surely, but somebody has to turn sidewalk chalk into indelible ink, desire into something more real for this world. That I believe is to us in this House and to our country. May that be our way to honour those who fell in Boston yesterday.

* * *

BERNADETTE MCCANN HOUSE FOR WOMEN

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Bernadette McCann House for Women serves Renfrew County with outreach offices in Pembroke, Renfrew, Arnprior, Killaloe and Petawawa. Founded by Bernadette McCann, the house was incorporated in 1978. It is dedicated to providing safe emergency accommodation, offering individual and group support, safety planning, education on abuse and resources that give hope for a better way of life.

Bernadette McCann House for Women is the first women's shelter and support services organization in Canada to be voluntarily accredited by FOCUS Accreditation. FOCUS measures the delivery of community and social services. By electing to be accredited by a rigorous external evaluation, Bernadette McCann House for Women has undertaken a commitment to improving the quality of services they provide and to offering services effectively in a manner that meets best practice.

Congratulations to all those who have helped Bernadette McCann House for Women achieve this recognition for the services it provides to our Renfrew County community.

* * *

BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF CANADA

Mr. Scott Andrews (Avalon, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to pay tribute to Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada on the occasion of its centennial.

At a time when role models are in short supply, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada has done our society a great service by continuing to offer quality mentorship programs to kids across the country. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada believes that by changing the course of young lives, we can in turn be changing the course of a community's future. As a big supporter of programs like the Cadets and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, I completely agree with this philosophy.

The young person inspired today will be the adult who helps build a better society for all of us tomorrow. Therefore, on behalf of me and the Liberal Party of Canada, I congratulate Big Brothers Big Sisters and their army of mentors, who provide kids with positive reinforcement, good times and a shoulder to lean on in bad times, for their contribution to Canada. Here is to another 100 years of making a difference.

* * *

SRI LANKA

Mr. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary East, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canada remains deeply concerned about the state of media freedom in Sri Lanka.

The offices of a newspaper in northern Sri Lanka were attacked again on Saturday. The BBC recently suspended all radio broadcasts following what it called "continued interruption and interference" by the national broadcaster. Faraz Shauketaly, a journalist, was shot on February 15. The 2009 killing of editor Lasantha Wickrematunge and the 2010 disappearance of Prageeth Ekneligoda, a cartoonist, remain unresolved.

Last month's UN Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka expressed concern about continuing reports of violations of freedom of expression as well as intimidation of and reprisals against journalists. Canada urges the government of Sri Lanka to ensure freedom of expression and the safety of media personnel and to fully investigate these attacks.

* * *

● (1405)

[Translation]

THE ECONOMY

Ms. Françoise Boivin (Gatineau, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the people of Gatineau continue to bear the brunt of the Conservative government's policies. There is only bad news in the budget for them.

Statements by Members

The Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights has just vetted a Conservative bill that will increase sentences for those who recruit gang members. However, the Minister of Public Safety is slashing programs to prevent gang violence. In Gatineau, that means the end of the joint police squad to fight gangs, which harbour criminals in Gatineau. This is completely outrageous and it does not make sense.

It is also outrageous that Canada Post wants to close its outlet on rue Racine, the only post office in the riding of Gatineau. This post office is vital to our small businesses and is known for its efficiency. Since the proposed closure was announced, I have been receiving telephone calls, emails, Facebook messages and petitions from constituents who have been speaking out loud and clear against the closure of this post office.

Public safety and economic performance are just for show. The people of Gatineau and I take issue with this government, and we will work together to put in power a government worthy of our aspirations in 2015.

* * *

[English]

TAXATION

Mrs. Cathy McLeod (Kamloops—Thompson—Cariboo, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government takes aggressive international tax planning seriously and is committed to cracking down on those who attempt to cheat the system. That is why we have increased audit resources for our international audit program by roughly 40% and for the aggressive tax planning program by over 90%. This means that we have more experts examining suspicious transactions and focusing on the abusive use of tax havens.

Economic action plan 2013 proposes further measures to tackle this global issue by implementing new ways to collect the critical information that will further assist in uncovering undeclared income and hidden assets. All these measures combined would give our government an unprecedented ability to crack down on those who avoid paying their fair share while making it increasingly difficult to hide money offshore.

* * *

VETERAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Mr. Kevin Sorenson (Crowfoot, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on Remembrance Day last year, during the ceremony at Veteran Elementary School, Private First Class Dave Pennington shared his experiences in the Canadian Armed Forces. Some of the stories were sad—setbacks and loss—and others were of victory during World War II.

When questioned about his medals, he also lamented that his medals had been lost or destroyed. So moved were the students by this brave soldier's story that they began working to replace his missing medals. On March 28, the students at Veteran Elementary School invited Private First Class Pennington, his family and me to their school. As a total surprise, the students presented Dave Pennington with the replacement medals.

A veteran shares his story of standing up for Canada's freedom, then a new generation of Canadians is moved to honour a Canadian

war veteran in a special way. Then the Government of Canada assists these young students by replacing the medals.

Congratulations to Private First Class David Pennington and to the students of Veteran Elementary School in Veteran, Alberta.

* * *

VANCOUVER ARTS CENTRES

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, East Vancouver has a dynamic and long-standing arts community. Today I would like to pay tribute to three organizations that have served our community for four decades.

Western Front is a pioneering artist-run centre for contemporary art and music. With its diverse programming, Western Front is a crucial platform for interdisciplinary experimental art practices in Canada and internationally.

Operating as a training centre, a production studio and an international video distributor, VIVO is Vancouver's oldest artist-run media arts centre. VIVO provides opportunities for artists to share and develop their work in an inclusive environment.

The Vancouver East Cultural Centre, affectionately named "The Cultch", is dedicated to supporting and presenting contemporary theatre, dance and music. It is Vancouver's cultural treasure.

I salute these amazing organizations and their 40 years of outstanding creativity, resilience and vision. They are beloved in Vancouver and in our local community.

* * *

● (1410)

AIR FORCE APPRECIATION DAY

Hon. Laurie Hawn (Edmonton Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is an honour to rise in the House today to mark Air Force Appreciation Day on the Hill and to celebrate members of the Royal Canadian Air Force. These brave men and women serve our country daily with honour and distinction, just as their predecessors have done since the RCAF was formed on April 1, 1924.

In the past year, search and rescue personnel have responded to more than a thousand calls for help. Air force personnel conducted many sovereignty operations in the north with the CF-18. They have also deployed as part of the training mission in Afghanistan, supported the French mission in Mali, defended the air space over Iceland, combated piracy at sea, provided tactical helicopter support for the army and hauled personnel and cargo in support of the broader missions of the Canadian Armed Forces. Yesterday, we announced a richly deserved special award to members of Bomber Command.

All Canadians can be proud of the contributions by the more than 15,000 regular and reserve members of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Today we recognize their service and sacrifice. *Per ardua ad astra.*

Statements by Members

[Translation]

AIR FORCE APPRECIATION DAY

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today is Air Force Appreciation Day. It is an opportunity for my colleagues and me to recognize the outstanding contributions made by members of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

Our air force is always ready to serve our country, whether that involves conducting search and rescue missions, protecting our sovereignty or providing humanitarian aid.

Whether the members work as pilots, mechanics, weapons specialists, meteorologists, aerospace engineers, air combat systems officers, air traffic controllers, equipment operators, logistics officers or intelligence experts; as imagery, search and rescue, or aviation and avionics systems technicians; or as firefighters, doctors, musicians or cooks, they all do their duty with passion, dedication and discipline.

I therefore encourage all my colleagues to join me in recognizing the tremendous dedication of all the men and women of the Royal Canadian Air Force, from the chief of the air force staff right down through the ranks.

* * *

[English]

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Mr. Speaker, many of us have spent our lives provincially suffering under the socialist policies, programs and destructive economic initiatives of the NDP. Overnight NDP members want us to believe they have turned their back on their entire disastrous heritage.

The leader of the NDP wants to leave the impression he has stopped the socialist heartbeat of the NDP. He will have little success.

The NDP remains a proud member of Socialist International. The NDP socialist caucus was out in full force last weekend supporting resolutions praising Hugo Chavez, nationalizing Canadian industry, boycotting Israel and shutting down our resource sector and industries.

While the NDP champagne socialists in the House may attempt to turn their backs on their comrades, it is no secret that socialism is alive and well in the NDP.

Canadians are listening when NDP members for Churchill and Vancouver East warn the NDP leader, “You can kick socialism out of the NDP constitution, but you can’t kick the socialists and their ideology out of the NDP”.

* * *

2013 BOSTON MARATHON

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, let me express my condolences to the victims and families of the terrible tragedy that struck Boston yesterday, and all those who gathered to take place in what should have been a joyous celebration of achievement, sport and peace. I know all my colleagues in the House are keeping all those affected in our prayers.

Hours before tragedy struck, thousands of athletes from around the world boarded buses, excited, speaking innumerable languages and building bridges among nations, with families proudly taking pictures and promising to be at the finish line.

Equally proud Bostonians welcomed their cherished visitors, and all runners, no matter how many times they have run, are humbled by their generosity.

Cowardly and heinous attacks of this kind cannot and will not tear apart the values upon which Boston and its marathon were founded. We must find out what happened, bring those responsible to justice and help a resilient city and athletic community recover.

* * *

NEW DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF CANADA

Mr. Randy Hoback (Prince Albert, CPC): Mr. Speaker, everywhere I turn I am reminded of the NDP’s \$20 billion carbon tax. When I travel, be it by train, plane or car, I cannot help but think of the hundreds of dollars Canadians would have to shovel out to support the NDP’s reckless carbon tax.

Economists estimate the NDP’s carbon tax would increase the price of gas by 10¢ a litre. What is worse, the NDP leader promised to go beyond the carbon scheme so he could win a leadership race.

Now NDP members are debating on whether or not they are still socialists. I have news for them. Significantly increasing taxes on Canadians through a reckless \$20 billion carbon tax so they can spend frivolously on government programs means that socialism is alive and well in the NDP.

* * *

● (1415)

CONSERVATIVE PARTY OF CANADA

Ms. Jean Crowder (Nanaimo—Cowichan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, over 2,000 New Democrats gathered in Montreal last week for our policy convention, the most delegates ever. It was inspiring to see Canadians from coast to coast to coast committed to working together and building a better Canada.

New Democrats showed our experience, our seriousness and our policy depth. We showed that we were united behind the great work of our leader. We showed how we were focused on Canadians’ real priorities: jobs, sustainability, fairness for aboriginal peoples.

In contrast, the Conservatives continue to reveal their priorities: unable to defend their unpopular budget and unable to speak honestly to Canadians. The Conservatives seek to divide and continue to make up things to attack the opposition.

Our convention strengthened my resolve to stand up to those cynical tactics. It is times like this that I am especially proud to be a New Democrat, bringing our message of hope and optimism to all Canadians.

*Oral Questions***2013 BOSTON MARATHON**

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I was in Boston yesterday joined by 27,000 fellow runners and millions of spectators. What was an unparalleled community celebration, unfortunately ended in tragedy.

Runners and visitors from all over the world were there to run the famed 42 kilometre route from Hopkinton to Boston. Sadly, senseless violence rocked the innocence of a sport, a community and, indeed, the world.

Running is a sport of perseverance and will, and it will take all of that over the coming days and weeks to rise above this horrible attack. We will all remember the running of the 117th Boston Marathon now, sadly, for very different reasons.

I ask all members of the House to join me in condemning this violence but, most important, by expressing our deepest of sympathies to the victims and their families and thanking the courageous emergency personnel and volunteers who rushed toward danger and not away from it to help those in need.

This grief is shared and the thoughts and prayers of the Canadian people are with our closest of friends and allies in the United States, in particular the great people of the Boston Athletic Association.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[English]

CANADA-U.S. RELATIONS

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians reacted with shock and sadness yesterday as we witnessed the horrific acts of violence committed in Boston.

Could the government update Canadians on its response to this tragedy and specifically the steps taken to provide assistance and consular services to the 2,000 Canadians and their families who were at yesterday's Boston Marathon?

[Translation]

Could the government provide an update on the steps taken to provide assistance to the 2,000 Canadians and their families who were at the Boston Marathon yesterday during the tragic attacks?

[English]

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister and indeed all Canadians want to tell all those in Boston that we stand with them in this most difficult time for the city of Boston, indeed for the United States.

It appears that no Canadians were seriously injured or killed in yesterday's attack, but that does not affect the fact that we are heartbroken as Canadians. Our hearts, our thoughts and our prayers are with those who are affected by this terrible tragedy.

The Prime Minister and our government stand shoulder to shoulder with President Obama, the mayor of Boston and governor of Massachusetts as they try to find those cowards who are responsible for this terrible attack.

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank the government for its response.

Last week, Royal Bank apologized for the temporary foreign worker situation, but the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism—who approved this improper use of the program, which led to the dismissal of Canadian workers—still refuses to take responsibility.

What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that the temporary foreign worker program can no longer be used to squeeze out Canadian workers?

• (1420)

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on May 2, 2011, Canadians gave us a mandate to govern this country and create jobs for Canadians. That is what we are doing. Canada is the top G7 country when it comes to employment.

The concerns about this program are serious. That is why budget 2013 contains reforms that will enable us to talk about these issues, develop policies, make investments and take the steps necessary to create jobs for Canadians.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last year, based on a recommendation of a government committee stacked with Conservative members and lobbyists, the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism launched a new fast-track approval process for temporary foreign workers. His process is being used to replace skilled Canadian workers with temporary foreign workers. It is no accident. This is what the Conservatives wanted.

Why did the Conservatives create a process that makes it easier to replace Canadian workers with temporary foreign workers? That is the question.

[English]

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what is very strange about these questions from the New Democrats is that they say on the one hand that they want his program to be shut down, but on the other hand, every day after question period, we have a steady parade of New Democrat members of Parliament over to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and over to the Minister of Human Resources asking for special treatment to bring temporary foreign workers into NDP constituencies.

We have letters from eight NDP members of Parliament who have asked for temporary foreign workers to be brought in to their constituencies. We have many more New Democrats who say one thing in the House, but when question period is over, they come over here and ask that we continue and enlarge the temporary foreign worker program for them. "Do as I say, not as I do" is the policy of the NDP.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative government's new accelerated approval process, its term, for temporary foreign workers was supposed to specifically target highly skilled workers.

Oral Questions

In fact, it has been used to hire workers at gas stations, convenience stores and fast food restaurants. The program has been used to hire workers at Tim Hortons, McDonald's, Subway and A&W. What special skill set was the minister looking for? Sandwich artists, servers on roller skates?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, again, to the substance of the question, if the leader of the NDP actually wants to have a serious debate on this subject, it would be great if he would support budget 2013 where we actually will move forward with reforms that are necessary both to the temporary foreign worker program and also to do what job creators across the country are calling for, which is an approach by the Government of Canada, focused with those who are actually creating jobs, with the Canada job grant so we can partner with them to fill those spots that are not being filled right now by Canadians.

We want to ensure we have full-time, well-paying jobs for Canadians. We have the programs and proposals in budget 2013 to make it happen.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, last year the Conservatives missed their own economic growth targets by 35%. Last month, the Canadian economy lost nearly 55,000 jobs. Today, the IMF has downgraded Canada's economic outlook yet again.

Instead of taking action, Conservatives are slashing \$6 billion in infrastructure funding and killing tens of thousands of jobs. Instead of investing in job creation, they are killing venture capital funds. That is in the budget the member just referred to.

The only job plan the Conservatives have is to bring in more temporary foreign workers. That is the problem.

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is ridiculous. Canada has the best job record in all of the G7. If they want to compare apples to apples, plan to plan, we put forward our economic action plan 2013, and Canada has the best job numbers in all of the G7. Over 900,000 net new jobs have been created since the worst part of the recession.

What was the NDP plan? It was tabled by the finance critic for the NDP. It contains no numbers, no proposals, expression of sentiment but no actual ideas to move this country forward. All we hear from the NDP, time and time again, rhetorically, is the need to raise taxes and spend more money.

We stand on the side of consumers and job creators to build a strong national economy.

* * *

TAXATION

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, again today I am going to bring forward an issue that is of great concern to middle-class Canadians. The Conservatives' budget is imposing a new tax of over \$300 million a year on goods ranging from scissors to wigs to coffee makers.

Since the Prime Minister did not actually answer my question yesterday, I will ask the Minister of Finance. Will the Conservatives

admit that this is in fact a new tax on middle-class Canadians and commit to cancelling it?

• (1425)

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, if we were raising the taxes, the Liberals would be all for it. It was the member for Papineau who first ran for election back in 2006, and he said he ran on that platform because he was inspired by the Liberals' green shift, which was a carbon tax.

We believe in lowering taxes for Canadian families. The average family of four today has \$3,200 more in its pockets than before we came into office. Time and again we have lowered taxes for Canadians. Time and again, the Liberals have rejected it.

If the Liberals want to compare our record with theirs, we are more than happy to. We are the party of low taxes; it is the party of high taxes, every single time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I look forward to comparing the Liberal Party's deficits with those of the Conservative Party.

The middle class benefits from international trade only when we have clear and coherent policies, yet this latest budget is imposing a hidden tax of over \$300 million on basic goods.

Will the minister give us an answer this time? Will he admit that this is in fact a new tax on middle-class Canadians, and will he reverse this senseless decision?

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, not only will I not admit it, but I will also stress the fact that our government has cut taxes for Canadian taxpayers and businesses across Canada to create jobs in every region of our country.

That is why Canada has the best job growth record in the G7, and we are proud of that. We have cut the GST and taxes on consumers. Every time we implemented a budget to cut taxes, the Liberal Party and the NDP voted against it.

[*English*]

Mr. Justin Trudeau (Papineau, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the government may have reduced tariffs in 2010, only to raise them by over \$300 million in budget 2013 on common household items. This sends exactly the wrong signals to our trading partners.

In this hopeful, hard-working corner of the House, we believe that trade creates good, middle-class jobs. However, in order to create good, middle-class jobs through trade, we need a consistent and clear trade policy. Will the minister admit that this is in fact a new tax on middle-class Canadians, and will he cancel it?

Oral Questions

Hon. James Moore (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we do have a consistent and clear agenda when it comes to trade. We are at the table negotiating TPP; we are at the Canada–Europe free trade agreement; we are the party of NAFTA and FTA in ensuring that—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. Minister of Canadian Heritage is now answering the question and he has the floor, so we will have a little order.

The hon. Minister of Canadian Heritage.

Hon. James Moore: Mr. Speaker, our record on trade liberalization is clear. We believe in creating Canadian jobs through world sales. When it comes to taxes, the Liberal record is very clear. It is the party of higher taxes.

On this question of tariffs, the question for the new leader of the Liberal Party is this: why does he want to give a special deal to China? Why does he want to make sure Canadian companies cannot compete on a level playing field with other companies around the world? That is the question.

* * *

FOOD SAFETY

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in typical Conservative fashion, spending plans for food safety were quietly released on the last day of sitting before the Easter break. Conservatives are cutting Canada's food safety program by \$38 million, eliminating more than 300 full-time staff. No wonder they wanted to hide the report.

New legislation at improving food safety will require resources to make it work. How can the minister defend these reckless cuts to food safety, and why did he hide these cuts from Canadians?

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): There is absolutely nothing hidden, Mr. Speaker. These are public documents that go up on websites, that are tabled in the House of Commons. Anybody who wants to read them can. I will have someone read them to the member for Welland should he so desire.

At the end of the day, we continue to build the capacity at CFIA. We constantly increase its budgetary ability to move forward. We constantly hire front-line food inspectors. We will continue to do that, despite their voting down every one of those initiatives.

• (1430)

[Translation]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that is not true.

He should read his report on plans and priorities before voting in favour of this budget because it includes \$38 million in cuts—\$38 million.

It is not just the administration that will be affected. Food inspection services will also be affected, and inspectors who are actually doing the work are the ones who will lose their jobs.

The health of Canadians is in jeopardy, and the industry is concerned about declining health standards.

Will the minister come back and explain to the parliamentary committee how overworked CFIA employees will cope when 300 positions are cut?

[English]

Hon. Gerry Ritz (Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and Minister for the Canadian Wheat Board, CPC): It would come as no surprise, Mr. Speaker, that I completely reject the premise of that question. There have been no cuts to food safety at CFIA. Certainly, we are looking for efficiencies at CFIA and every other agency and department of this government. We have found those and we are moving forward.

I will be happy to come back to Parliament when we have the supplementary estimates (A), the supplementary estimates (B) and the supplementary estimates (C) that continue to build the capacity of CFIA to do the great job it does. I would be hopeful at that time that the NDP would actually see fit to vote for those increases.

* * *

[Translation]

CANADA REVENUE AGENCY

Mr. Guy Caron (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, NDP): Mr. Speaker, rather than blindly cutting food inspection services and increasing taxes on practically all consumer goods, the Conservatives could be acquiring effective tools to combat tax evasion and thereby recover up to \$8 billion a year, according to independent studies. However, that is not what they are doing.

Their report on plans and priorities for the Canada Revenue Agency contains many cuts that have a direct impact on investigative services, such as closing the voluntary disclosure centre in Montreal. The government has transferred the centre's responsibilities to Shawinigan without providing that office with any additional resources.

Why is the government cutting thousands of jobs at the CRA when it should be redoubling its efforts to combat tax evasion?

[English]

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of National Revenue and Minister for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are keeping tax rates low by closing tax loopholes and by making the system fairer.

All the efficiencies identified in budget 2013 apply only to internal operations and will not affect CRA's audit or enforcement capabilities. As a matter of fact, we have increased our resources to international tax evasion by over 40%.

Oral Questions

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the facts just do not support the minister's claims. The fact is that Conservatives are taking \$68 million from the returns compliance section of the CRA, which is responsible for enforcing "compliance with Canada's tax laws". They are also cutting \$120 million and over 250 full-time staff from the reporting compliance section, whose job is detecting non-compliance "through risk assessment, audit, investigation".

Will the minister now stand up and acknowledge she is cutting the very CRA sections responsible for going after tax cheats?

Hon. Gail Shea (Minister of National Revenue and Minister for the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I have previously informed the member in the House, efficiencies identified in the budget apply only to internal operations. They will not in any way affect CRA's audit or enforcement capabilities.

As a matter of fact, since 2006, we have increased resources on the international tax evasion file by 40% and we have identified more than \$4.5 billion in unpaid taxes. This compares to just \$174 million in the last year of the Liberal government.

* * *

TAXATION

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, hidden tax hikes on everyday consumer products like bicycles, iPods and even coffee have been introduced in the government's budget. The Conservatives can try to deny it, but it is right there on page 331 of their budget document.

With the slowing economy and families being squeezed, how can the Conservatives justify raising prices on so many everyday consumer products? How can they justify taking more money out of the pockets of Canadians?

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, that is pretty incredible coming from the NDP that wants to, first of all, put a carbon tax on every item that Canadians purchase. We have totalled it up. It is somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$56 billion worth of promises. There is only one place where that party will go to get that money and that is the Canadian taxpayer. We will have none of that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it really seems that the parliamentary secretary is going to vote in favour of his budget without even reading it. Yet all the tax hikes are written in black and white on pages 331 and 332. We are talking about hidden tax increases and money that the Conservatives will take directly out of people's pockets. The Conservatives wash their hands of this every day in the House and deny that there are new taxes like the tax on iPods, even though credible business leaders, from Sony Canada among other companies, confirm that they have already started to pay those taxes.

Why are they trying to stick Canadian families with the bill for their bad decisions?

• (1435)

[*English*]

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to clarify for the hon. member. I am quite sure that the parliamentary secretary is actually going to support the budget. I would encourage those hon. members to do that too.

The hon. member has been giving speeches in the House and meeting with her constituents and explaining to them that this is a continuation of a low-tax plan. We have started on this plan and we will continue on it because it is working. It has helped businesses grow. Businesses have hired nearly 900,000 new Canadians. That is important. That is what they care about.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, not only are they in denial, but they are living in a fantasy world. In their fantasy world, taxes are not taxes if the Conservatives are the ones imposing them. That is in stark contrast to the reality of seniors, who will have to pay more for everyday items, whether at the pharmacy or the grocery store. This tax increase that will affect seniors comes only one year after the Conservatives targeted the old age security program.

Why not help seniors instead of cutting their income and increasing their expenses?

[*English*]

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): As a matter of fact, Mr. Speaker, we continue to reduce the taxes that seniors pay. We have taken one million Canadians completely off the tax roll. If the NDP were ever allowed to impose taxes on Canadians, and God forbid, I am not sure where seniors would be other than in the poor house, because that party would increase the costs that every senior deals with on a day-to-day basis. We will continue on our low-tax plan.

* * *

[*Translation*]

THE ECONOMY

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that is nonsense. In addition to hiking taxes, the Conservatives are cutting the budgets of all the departments. These austerity measures have been condemned by the IMF, which has downgraded its forecast of Canada's GDP growth. The IMF report indicates that the unemployment rate will remain high and that we will continue to post a huge current account deficit.

Will the Conservatives stand by their partisan austerity measures and twiddle their thumbs while the economy flounders?

[*English*]

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member must have been reading a different IMF report from the one I was reading.

Oral Questions

The IMF today reaffirmed the fact that Canada continues to lead the G7 countries in economic growth. We have the best financial record in all of the G7. It is not just the IMF that has said that. All three of the credit rating agencies continue to rate Canada as AAA. Our bonds are sought after from all over the world. The NDP does not recognize any of that.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, living in an upside down world will not make the bad news go away.

Today we learned that in February foreign investors sold off \$6.3 billion in Canadian securities. That is the largest sell-off since October 2007. Who can be surprised when we have a government that refuses to acknowledge the fiscal reality, that is raising tariffs, that still has not clarified what the net benefit test is for foreign investment?

Just where is the government's plan to improve the investment climate?

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is a plan. It is the economic action plan, and the NDP has voted against it every single time. That plan has put us in an enviable position.

Rather than listening to the opposition, let me quote what the IMF actually said today: "Canada is in an enviable position.... At this stage, the policies that are being deployed are, in our minds, broadly appropriate".

I would rather listen to the IMF, Mr. Speaker.

* * *

TAXATION

Hon. Judy Sgro (York West, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while seniors and the disabled were ignored in the 2013 budget, many touched by the so-called Conservative plan were clearly left reeling. Middle-class families now face increased taxation on essentials like electric household heaters, baby carriages and school supplies. Even blankets will now bear an extra 5% tax. Conservatives have lowered the price for yachts, but are clearly raising the price for daily essentials for families. The Liberals know that middle-class families need a break. Will the Minister of Finance finally admit that this is nothing short of a new tax on Canadians and agree to cancel it?

• (1440)

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will repeat that our low-tax plan continues. We started it in 2009 after the recession and we continue with it now. We are one of the few countries that has been able to reduce taxes as our economy continues to grow and as the number of jobs in this country continues to grow.

That is important to Canadians. We will continue on that path, and it would be very nice if the opposition would actually read the good things in the budget to get Canadians back to work and keep the economy growing.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, if the member does not want to lose his credibility, then he should call a spade a spade.

An increase in import tariffs is an increase in taxes. The worst thing is that the middle class will have to pay. Montrealers are going to have to pay more, whether they are buying a coffee maker, a bicycle or children's shoes. It is as simple as that.

Can the government be honest here? Will the government admit that this is a new tax and agree to cancel it in order to prevent the cost of living from going up?

[English]

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Minister of State for Finance.

Hon. Ted Menzies: Mr. Speaker, I see the new leader of the Liberal Party is working on his heckling.

I do want to say that what we put forward in the economic action plan, in budget 2013, continues on our low-tax plan. We are proud of the fact that during the recession we have been able to continue. We have actually reduced 150 different taxes to businesses and to individuals. The average family of four gets to keep \$3,200 more in their own pockets. That is where we think it should be.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Wascana, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives are increasing tariff taxes by \$333 million every year. It is just like increasing the GST: a money grab to concoct the illusion of a balanced budget by 2015. To feed that fiction, Canadians will be forced to pay more for everything from tricycles at 4.5% more, baby carriages at 3% more and cosmetic wigs for cancer patients at 15% more.

The government should cancel these new Conservative taxes and stop ripping off the middle class. Why will it not do it?

Hon. Ted Menzies (Minister of State (Finance), CPC): Mr. Speaker, I should remind you that the NDP and the Liberals voted against every tax reduction that we have put forward. Every initiative that we have made and put forward for Canadians—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Minister of State for Finance still has the floor.

Hon. Ted Menzies: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Apparently the truth does hurt.

We continue on that low-tax plan. That is very important for Canadians. We will continue on that path and we would like some support from the other side. Members on the other side seem to simply want to raise taxes on everything that comes before them. We will not do that.

*Oral Questions***EMPLOYMENT**

Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims (Newton—North Delta, NDP): Mr. Speaker, after failing to fix the temporary foreign worker program after months and months, it seems Conservatives finally realize they have a problem. This program has tripled in size under the Conservatives and Liberals, and recent changes have more to do with keeping wages down than with filling any labour shortages. Will Conservatives now rescind the decision to allow businesses to pay foreign workers 15% less than Canadians for the same job?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me be very clear. Contrary to recent reports and indeed what the hon. member has just said, employers cannot pay temporary foreign workers less than they would pay a Canadian doing the same job. Those are the facts.

However, we are concerned with some of the reports that are coming in about the temporary foreign worker program. We want to address those to make sure that Canadians always get first crack at every job. That is why we have committed in budget 2013 to reviewing the program and making changes so that it will work in the best interests of all Canadians.

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister has refused to address the issue of unfairness to temporary foreign workers.

The Conservatives are also failing young Canadians who they say should consider a skilled trade job. Skilled trades and construction workers say that the government needs a wake-up call. The real barrier to skilled workers is a lack of paid apprenticeships. The Canadian Apprenticeship Forum reports that less than 50% of employers that hire skilled workers are taking on apprentices.

When will the Conservatives take real action for real training opportunities for young Canadians?

• (1445)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, one of the first things that our government did when we first became government was to introduce the apprenticeship incentive grant. It is \$1,000 a year for each of the first two years for people who sign up for apprenticeships. Then we brought in the apprenticeship completion grant, as well as tax relief for employers who take on apprentices. This will come as no surprise, but the NDP voted against all of those initiatives to help people become apprentices.

In budget 2013 there is also a new program called the Canada jobs grant. In this program we will be working with industry and the provinces to make sure that young people and those who are already in the workforce or who perhaps are not working right now get access to the training that they need for the jobs that are in demand.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister's answer proves that when it comes to temporary foreign workers, she never lets the facts get in the way of her question period answer.

It is the same story with employment insurance. Even the IMF, which is infamous for its austerity programs, is telling us that austerity is inappropriate for Canada and that employment insurance is particularly important in these challenging economic times. However, despite all of the evidence, the Conservatives are continuing with their ideological cuts to EI.

When will the minister admit that her reckless cuts to EI are putting Canada's economy in danger and leaving Canadian families behind?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, EI is a program that is there to support Canadians financially when they have lost a job through no fault of their own. However, it is also there to help them get back to work. We have made advances in just that, helping Canadians get back to work, by connecting them with jobs that are available within their skill range and geographic area so that they and their families will always be better off when they work than when they do not.

However, if those opportunities are not there for Canadians, EI will continue to be there for them, as it always has been.

[Translation]

Mrs. Anne-Marie Day (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the IMF has admonished Canada for its austerity measures, and the IMF is not exactly known for its social democratic values. Now is really not the time to be gutting the employment insurance program.

It is up to the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development. She can choose to continue weakening our economy by taking aim at the unemployed and driving wages down, or she can listen to the IMF and stop gutting EI. What will she choose?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are choosing to help the unemployed find work in their field and in their region. Canada's employment insurance system is there to financially support those who are out of work while they look for another job. If unemployed Canadians cannot find work in their region or in their field, employment insurance will be there for them, as always.

* * *

[English]

HEALTH

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Cumberland—Colchester—Musquodoboit Valley, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister has been clear that supporting Canadian families is a priority for our government. Today the Minister of Health met with families and community groups to outline actions that we are taking to support Canadian families in terms of food, drugs and consumer safety products.

Oral Questions

Can the Minister of Health please inform this House of the steps our government is taking to protect the health and safety of Canadian families?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for that great question.

As the Minister of Health and as a mother, I am proud to outline areas where our government will take concrete actions in the months ahead. For example, we are moving toward more plain language on drug labels, taking action on products that contain small powerful magnets that threaten children's safety, improving adverse drug reaction reporting and proposing enhanced safety standards for playpens.

Our government is taking action to support the health and safety of Canadians and their families.

Ms. Libby Davies (Vancouver East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, incredibly, it was 17 months ago that the Auditor General alerted the Minister of Health to the problems with drug safety. It has taken that long to get any action.

Now we have over 1,000 patients in Ontario and New Brunswick who have received diluted chemotherapy drugs from a company operating in a legal loophole. Incredibly, Marchese Hospital Solutions has no provincial or federal oversight, and its products were never inspected. Surely this cannot be allowed to go on, putting the patients' health at risk.

Why is this minister not taking immediate action to ensure a safe supply of chemotherapy drugs?

• (1450)

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, my thoughts and prayers are with the individuals and families who have been affected by this situation. I have written to the Ontario health minister to voice my concerns. I have also instructed Health Canada officials to co-operate fully with the investigation which the Wynne government is leading.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, prayers will not raise the dead.

We want to know what the minister is doing to protect Canadians' health. We want to know how, in consultation with the provinces, she is ensuring that pharmaceutical companies take responsibility for their actions.

More than 1,000 cancer patients in New Brunswick and Ontario received incorrect chemotherapy doses. We need to find a solution now so that this does not happen again.

What is the minister's plan?

[*English*]

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of Health, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the issue of patient care in hospitals, the practice of pharmacy and admixing all fall

under provincial jurisdiction. I have written to the Ontario health minister to express my concerns. I have also instructed Health Canada officials to co-operate fully in the investigation. If the review determines that there is a federal role, we will seriously consider any changes that are recommended to prevent this from happening again.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us continue to talk about people's health.

The Minister of Transport claims that ports are not his responsibility, that the Port of Québec is independent and that people are appointed to the board of directors to take care of the port.

I would like to tell the minister something. While the Port of Québec directors, who were appointed by the Conservatives, are watching nickel dust fall on Limoilou and Lévis, the health of the people in these communities is being affected.

Incidentally, does the hon. member for Lévis—Bellechasse, like the minister, also not care that people are breathing in high concentrations of nickel?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on March 27, the public health authority for the Quebec City area issued a press release signed by Dr. François Desbiens, which indicated that the situation did not pose a public health threat requiring immediate action.

People need to understand that the hon. member is making interpretations and wants to judge the whole matter. The Port of Québec must manage the Port of Québec. A board of directors is in place, and the Port of Québec responded to this situation yesterday.

Although the Port of Québec continues its investigation, as of right now, we are committing, for the benefit of the public and all the stakeholders involved, to ensure that the tenant in question—because we are talking about a tenant here—will put the necessary measures in place. It is already done.

Mr. Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is a big difference between being unable to do something and not wanting to do it.

By law, the Port of Québec is part of the Canada Port Authorities, which fall under Transport Canada. Therefore, although a board of directors manages the port's day-to-day operations, the minister is still politically responsible for the current nickel dust situation and its potential effects.

He is responsible here and now in the House. The question is simple.

Can the minister tell us what he intends to do to resolve this crisis and reassure the people of Limoilou?

Hon. Denis Lebel (Minister of Transport, Infrastructure and Communities, Minister of the Economic Development Agency of Canada for the Regions of Quebec, Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and President of the Queen's Privy Council for Canada, CPC): Mr. Speaker, of course we have been in contact with the Port of Québec administration many times.

Oral Questions

However, unlike the NDP, we are not going to try to take over the management of the port's day-to-day operations when there are people in place to do that work. We know that the NDP wants to manage everything from Ottawa and wants to centralize everything.

We respect the boards of directors that are in place. We are ensuring that all the work is done. As I said, as of yesterday and even as far back as November, the Port of Québec has been helping to deal with this matter. We hope, for the public's sake, that the problem will be resolved quickly.

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[English]

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, since the Conservatives came to power seven years ago, one in seven jobs created have been filled by a temporary foreign worker, while at the same time a quarter of a million new Canadians have found themselves unemployed.

Blaming rogue companies, feigning concern, and promising reviews just does not cut it anymore. Canadians do not trust the government to run this program, to review this program, and certainly not to fix this program.

My question is to the minister. Will she let Parliament do its job and let it fix this Conservative mess?

●(1455)

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the goal of the temporary foreign worker program has always been to help provide labour where there is an acute and extended shortage of skills within the country, because we believe that Canadians should always have first crack at Canadian jobs.

Let us face it, the hon. member is blowing out of both sides. Right now he is saying that the program is not there, and it should work, yet he is asking for more people to be brought in under the temporary foreign worker program for his own riding.

[Translation]

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the program is very poorly managed and that is why workers are losing their jobs and employers cannot find—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. member for Saint-Laurent—Cartierville has the floor.

Hon. Stéphane Dion: Mr. Speaker, I will say it again so that the minister understands. Her program is so poorly managed that Canadian workers are losing their jobs because of it and Canadian employers cannot find foreign workers because of all the bureaucracy involved in the program.

Together with the Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, she let the program get so completely out of hand that she launched a review six months ago. However, we still have not received an answer. We have no idea when she will improve the program. Since she does not know how to do her job, she should let Parliament do it for her.

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our priority is to create jobs. We also want to connect Canadians with jobs that are available across Canada. That is our objective, our top priority.

When you have a clear and major shortage, you must look for people elsewhere to fill those positions temporarily. We are aware that there are problems with the program. That is why, in budget 2013, we announced that we would make changes.

* * *

DEMOCRATIC REFORM

Ms. Alexandrine Latendresse (Louis-Saint-Laurent, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in the spring of 2010, Elections Canada recommended that it be given more investigative powers so that we could better combat election fraud.

It has been three years, and the Conservatives have done nothing.

Last spring, the Conservatives promised to take action on this within six months. It has been a year and the Conservatives have yet to do anything.

The situation is not getting better. Last month, Elections Canada suggested other reforms. It has been a year and we have seen nothing.

The minister keeps going on about a reform that is supposedly on the way, but we have been waiting for years.

He is all talk and no action. When will he finally take action?

[English]

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadians' confidence in the integrity of our election system has been challenged.

Our government will introduce comprehensive election reform proposals to increase accountability, accessibility, and integrity in Canada's elections system.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to first congratulate the minister for having graduated from promising legislation in due course yesterday to promising it in the near future.

With the recent charges, we are a step closer to catching those behind the fraud scheme in the last election. The Chief Electoral Officer recently said that election law reforms "...need to be enacted by spring 2014 to give Elections Canada enough time to fully integrate them in time" for the next general election.

These reforms are obviously urgently needed, so one more time: when are we going to see this legislation?

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Conservative Party has been working with Elections Canada to get to the bottom of what happened in Guelph, and we are pleased to see that Elections Canada work has progressed this far.

Oral Questions

As I said, our government will introduce a comprehensive elections reform proposal to increase accountability, accessibility, and integrity in Canada's election system.

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VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. John Carmichael (Don Valley West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, while the NDP members continue to bend and twist Canada's rich military history to suit their far left leanings, our government is committed to commemorating Canadian veterans and their accomplishments.

In January our government proudly marked 2013 as the Year of the Korean War Veteran, and today the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Minister of National Defence made yet another great announcement. Would the Minister of Veterans Affairs please update this House on how we are continuing to recognize Canada's great accomplishments during the Korean War?

● (1500)

Hon. Steven Blaney (Minister of Veterans Affairs and Minister for La Francophonie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member for Don Valley West is right. They were young and reckless. Along with more than 15 countries with the United Nations 60 years ago, they fought in Korea for freedom, democracy, and the rule of law against communism. Today, the Minister of National Defence and I presented a certificate of recognition to our great Canadian Korean War veterans to show our deepest gratitude and recognition for their many sacrifices.

[Translation]

I thank our Korean War veterans.

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[English]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Hon. Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives have failed in their responsibility to sit down on a nation-to-nation basis to negotiate and implement a comprehensive land claim for the Métis in Labrador. This should come as no surprise. The government has allowed claims to languish for years without progress or resolution. Denying aboriginal people greater control over their futures is just wrong.

Will the minister commit today to immediately begin negotiating the NunatuKavut claim, yes or no?

Hon. Bernard Valcourt (Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to put it politely, it takes some gall. This claim was laid down in 1991 under a Conservative government and in 1992—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order, please. The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs has the floor. He has barely started his response and still has lots of time left.

The hon. Minister of Aboriginal Affairs has the floor.

Hon. Bernard Valcourt: Mr. Speaker, as a matter of fact, I said this claim was laid on the table in 1991, and for the better part of 13

years that the Liberals were in office, they did nothing with it and today they have the gall to stand and call for action while they are sitting in the third place.

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[Translation]

GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Ms. Nycole Turmel (Hull—Aylmer, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives promised that their cuts to the public service would not affect the quality of services provided to the public. However, we know that this is not true.

By 2016, 29,000 jobs will be eliminated, not 19,000, as they announced. At Human Resources and Skills Development and Veterans Affairs Canada, 25% of the staff will be eliminated; at Statistics Canada, it will be one-third.

Will the Conservatives redo the math and admit that they have misled the House?

[English]

Hon. Tony Clement (President of the Treasury Board and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Mr. Speaker, what that left-wing think tank has done, and the NDP, is combined what were temporary positions and assumed that we are reducing full-time positions, like the 8,000 census takers for the 2011 census.

The fact is there are 19,200 positions being reduced. Of course, we are doing so on behalf of the taxpayer because we believe that we can deliver excellent quality services to Canadians for less at a more sustainable cost to the taxpayer. That is why this government is in office: because we care about the taxpayer, we care about Canadians, we care about services, and we are not going to have a \$21 billion carbon tax.

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LA RÉFORME DÉMOCRATIQUE

Mr. Parm Gill (Brampton—Springdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in the government's response to the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs' 15th report, the Minister of State for Democratic Reform wrote:

An essential part of a well-functioning democracy is the willingness to make reforms to the administration of elections when needed....The Government will also review further recommendations of the Chief Electoral Officer of Canada that may be forthcoming.

Can the Minister of State for Democratic Reform please update the House on his plans to introduce a comprehensive election reform proposal?

Privilege

● (1505)

Hon. Tim Uppal (Minister of State (Democratic Reform), CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is pleased to announce that it will introduce comprehensive legislation on Thursday to improve the integrity, accountability, and administration of Canada's election laws. The new legislation will respond to the motion passed by the House of Commons last year and a recommendation made by the Chief Electoral Officer, the procedure and House affairs committee, and others.

* * *

EMPLOYMENT

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, earlier in question period, the Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development had the audacity to claim that employers cannot pay temporary foreign workers 15% less for the same work. Her own government's release stated, "A new wage...will also be introduced to provide employers with greater flexibility. Wages that are up to 15% below the average wage for an occupation in a specific region will be accepted...."

Will the minister stop making things up and fix the mess that she created?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member should tell Canadians the rest of the story, that this situation applies if, and only if, within that company other Canadians doing the very same job are being paid that wage.

We want to protect the jobs of Canadians. The previous system actually allowed for foreign workers to receive more money than Canadians doing the same job. That was not fair. That was not right. We fixed it to ensure Canadians get first crack at the jobs and that everyone is paid fairly.

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INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister told this House that Canada legally withdrew from the treaty to combat drought and desertification because it was "...not an effective way to [use] taxpayers' money". The cost of the treaty, \$300,000 a year, is roughly equivalent to half the cost of a G8 gazebo or 109 days of the care and feeding of a rented panda, less than 4% of the PMO office budget, a third the cost of shipping an armoured vehicle to India, or two days of government advertising to tell us how happy we should all be with the way the government is spending our money.

By what criteria is that spending more effective than pulling our weight in the world to confront drought and expanding deserts?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of International Cooperation, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to the criteria. That is making Canada's assistance more effective and efficient so we can dedicate those resources to the people most in need.

We are supporting concrete measures to help developing countries deal with drought instead of paying for conferences, salaries, and bureaucrats. Our commitment is to help the poor in a tangible way. We are doing that. It is not about talk shops or travel.

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of a parliamentary delegation from the Republic of Uzbekistan, led by Her Excellency Diloram G. Tashmukhamedova, Speaker of the Legislative Chamber of the Oliy Majlis.

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[Translation]

POINTS OF ORDER

1982 REPATRIATION OF THE CONSTITUTION

The Speaker: I am advised the hon. member for Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia wishes to raise a point of order.

Mr. Jean-François Fortin (Haute-Gaspésie—La Mitis—Matane—Matapédia, BQ): Mr. Speaker, the National Assembly of Quebec has just passed a unanimous motion that I will read to you.

That the National Assembly ask the Government of Canada to provide access to all information contained in its archives and demand that light be shed on the events that led to the proclamation of the Constitution Act, 1982.

As a result, I ask for the unanimous consent of the House to propose the following motion: "That the House call on the government to respond favourably to the request made by the National Assembly of Quebec and make public all information contained in its archives and that the House demand that light be shed on the events that led to the proclamation of the Constitution Act, 1982".

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

Some hon. members: No.

The Speaker: There is no unanimous consent.

[English]

The hon. member for South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale has informed the Chair that he is rising on the question of privilege that is currently before the Speaker.

* * *

● (1510)

PRIVILEGE

S. O. 31

Mr. Russ Hiebert (South Surrey—White Rock—Cloverdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak to the privilege raised prior to our break regarding Standing Order 31, known as members' statements.

Privilege

Other members have already addressed a number of important points, which I will not dwell on in detail in my comments, including: one, that without the right of all members to speak freely, this institution simply cannot function properly; two, that the period of statements was originally intended to give members equal opportunities to raise issues; three, that other opportunities for debate in the House, such as debate on a bill, reflect the principle that all members have the right to speak, even if their name does not appear on the list submitted by a party; four, that the decision by Speaker Sauvé to ask parties for guidance or lists of members to speak was done solely as a matter of efficiency for the Speaker and was never intended to give the various parties a veto over who could speak; five, that conventions are not the same as rules and can be revised when needed to reflect current realities; six, that S. O. 31s were not intended to be used a partisan tool; and seven, that even if we view our parties as akin to hockey teams, the Commons is more like a House league than the NHL, and you, as the convener, Mr. Speaker, need to step in when some players are not getting equal time on the ice.

As I said, I will not examine these points in further detail, but instead I hope to add to your understanding of the issue, Mr. Speaker, by examining the history of Standing Order 31.

It is perhaps not surprising to learn that members have used various conduits to make statements since at least the time of Confederation. According to the Annotated Standing Orders of the House of Commons, second edition, the rules which guide the period for statements by members place the antecedents back to at least 1867.

For about 60 years following Confederation, a rule existed which permitted motions to be proposed without notice, provided unanimous consent had been granted by the House. In the early to mid-1920s, however, the use of such motions experienced a marked increase.

In 1927, the House agreed to a recommendation that the Standing Orders be amended so that unanimous consent would only be sought in cases of “urgent and pressing necessity previously explained by the mover”. The rule, as amended, was thereafter infrequently employed for decades, until around 1968, when MPs increasingly began to rise daily, choosing to do so in the time before question period to move motions that often demonstrated no urgent or pressing necessity.

In 1975, the House amended its Standing Orders to stipulate that such motions could only be moved by non-ministers during a restricted time period to be held before oral questions.

It is noted by O'Brien and Bosc that the moving of these motions prior to oral questions became, throughout the remainder of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, a common, although misused and often time consuming feature of the proceedings of the House.

In 1982, the House accepted the Special Committee on Standing Orders and Procedures recommendation that it abolish this rule, which was called Standing Order 43, and institute a new renumbered standing order, Standing Order 31, that would have as its purpose to allow MPs to make statements on current issues on a daily basis during the first 15 minutes of a sitting.

I believe the key point that history teaches us is that members need to be assured reasonable opportunities to speak in the House, and should they be denied fair access, they may feel forced to use other opportunities the Standing Orders provide to ensure that their constituents concerns are represented.

The House has wisely recognized this tendency and rather than allowing certain rules to be used in unintended ways, to better accommodate the needs of members, the House has instead set aside specific times for members to have their say. Thus we have Standing Order 31.

However, S. O. 31s are not unique to our House of Commons. The Australian House of Representatives has a practice that is broadly similar to the period our Parliament has and it too set aside time for statements by members. During the time designated for non-government business, a 15-minute period is set aside prior to its question time for members' 90-second statements. During this time, any member, other than a minister or a parliamentary secretary, may be called by the Speaker of the House to make a statement on any topic. In calling which member is to speak, the Speaker alternates between government and non-government members, with those who have not spoken given preference over those who have spoken already. Independent members are also called upon with the frequency appropriate to their relative representation in the House.

Likewise, the British House of Commons provides time for members' statements, as do the legislatures of Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, Quebec, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan.

● (1515)

I will spare the House the details of each of these variations on the times allotted, the number of speakers each day and so on, but I will emphasize that there are two important points to be drawn generally from the various legislatures.

The first is that such statement periods are reserved for legislators who are not members of the cabinet. As ministers, they generally have a separate set of speaking privileges and opportunities assigned to them in each legislature. Fundamentally, the widespread and codified existence of a period for statements in so many different legislative bodies recognizes the need of legislators everywhere to have an outlet to briefly express their various needs or concerns.

A second lesson that we can draw from Westminster and the provinces is that in many instances, it is the codified practice that the Speaker alone decides on the rotation of the speakers and not the various parties. This is to say that the Speaker can be aided by a list, but is not bound by one. The Speaker is rightfully seen in these many legislatures as an impartial referee who will determine that the right to speak is apportioned equally to all members, regardless of party affiliation.

I would urge you, Mr. Speaker, to consider that if members in this place are to be accorded equal speaking rights under S. O. 31, then you and you alone can guarantee that these rights are respected.

Business of Supply

Indeed, our own House recognizes this very principle of equal time already when it comes to private members' business. Under private members' business, every member who is not a member of the cabinet has an equal opportunity to participate. The schedule of who gets to participate in introducing private legislation is arranged in a rotation, regardless of party affiliation, as we all know. The same principle should apply to S. O. 31s. A rotating schedule would allow every MP an equal opportunity to participate in this critically important speaking opportunity.

I am aware of members who have suggested that if we want to speak freely in this place, we should become an independent. I know we all agree that free speech is fundamental to the proper working of this institution. The idea that someone should have to leave his or her party just to be able to make a one minute statement in the House is simply not justified or reasonable. Nor is there any precedent for this drastic step in other parliaments.

Considering all the points that have been made, Mr. Speaker, I would urge you to consider this. There will always exist in our parliamentary system a tension between the demands of a party and the direction an individual member might want to take in representing his or her constituents. It is clear to me that under our system of government, sometimes the demands of the party will need to take to precedence if the government is to govern effectively, such as when it comes to support for a budget or other key government legislation.

However, there are also times when the rights of a member to speak freely should be paramount. Standing Order 31 speaking slots are one of those times. After all, these statements are merely words, no matter how contentious some of the subjects raised might be. There is no vote or any other action that can be taken during a one minute statement that is going to topple a government or cause an election. There is nothing to fear on the part of any party from ensuring members' rights to speak freely in the House are guaranteed.

In conclusion, Mr. Speaker, I would ask that you certify that the true spirit and intent of S. O. 31s are upheld by accepting the arguments in favour of the member for Langley's question of privilege and ensuring that members' statements be assigned equally on a rotating basis to all qualifying members of the House.

The Speaker: I thank the hon. member for his further points of this question.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, during the course of question period, the minister of heritage clearly held in his hand what appeared to be copies of correspondence from MPs to the government, but not likely to himself.

It is the custom of the House for ministers who reference documents and quote from them to table those documents. Clearly, the minister and backbenchers have been provided access to correspondence from members and individuals, information to which they were not entitled.

Were all obligations met under the Access to Information Act? Furthermore, will the government table the documentation related to both the Access to Information Act and Privacy Act that allows them to circulate correspondence from members to individuals who did not give authority to allow them to provide that information to members?

There is a serious matter here, but related to question period, the minister clearly held in his hand documentation, which was referenced not to his department but to HRSD, relating to the temporary foreign workers program. I ask that the minister table those letters in the House.

• (1520)

The Speaker: I imagine that there is a possibility that we will hear back from the minister on this point, but at this time, since I do not want to point out the presence or absence of a member, perhaps we will wait and see if the minister does come back to the House to address this point.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKER PROGRAM

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

The Speaker: There are still four minutes left for questions and comments for the hon. member for Malpeque.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Souris—Moose Mountain.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to ask the member why he might want to reinvent the wheel, when it is already there. I understand from the motion that he would like a committee composed of six government members, four members from the opposition and one member from his party.

I might advise him that a committee such as that already exists exactly in those numbers, with the member for Cape Breton—Canso being the vice-chair. This committee travelled throughout Canada and heard about the issue of skilled and lower-skilled trades, including the temporary foreign workers.

I would ask the member two questions. First, did the member submit witnesses or potential people to that committee through the member for Cape Breton—Canso? Second, the motion asks for a study or an examination through a committee, a committee that already exists. Another study will not answer the problems or the questions.

Pages 84 and 85 of the budget specifically talk about reforms to the temporary foreign worker program to ensure that Canadians are given the first chance for available jobs and that Canadians who are seeking jobs are first in line for those opportunities. It sets out point by point the number of reforms that would be made.

Business of Supply

My question is whether the member submitted witnesses to the committee. As well, has he read the budget and looked at the reforms?

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the member asked why we would reinvent the wheel. The reason is that half the spokes are out of the wheel under the Conservative government leadership. That is why the points in the budget are not solving this problem of temporary foreign workers.

Did he listen to all of our speeches? Maybe the member was reading all of his PMO talking points. The fact of the matter is that the temporary foreign worker program is working in some cases, such as in the agricultural community. However, we know from the RBC experience and others that there are areas where it is not working.

I would say to the hon. member that if there are problems out there, this House of Commons and its members, including backbenchers from the government party, have a responsibility to go out there, hold hearings, find the problems and recommend solutions. The solutions coming forward from HRSDC through the minister are just not good enough, and the member should recognize that.

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what is really disturbing to Canadians is the fact that the government has known how the temporary foreign worker program was being abused and used to drive down wages and make it simple for companies to not have to invest in training and apprenticeships. They could just bring in wholesale workers.

We saw this example with respect to bringing in workers from China to run a mine in B.C. The Conservatives knew it, but they ignored it, because they are supporting the outsourcing. They are supporting the downgrading of jobs in Canada to fit their rip-and-ship agenda of trying to get at resources as quickly as possible.

I would ask my hon. colleague how he thinks it is even possible to talk about a job plan for the economy when the government is undermining basic job training and apprenticeships.

● (1525)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, in response to my colleague's question, we know that although the government talks about job training in its budget, it clearly is not there.

With respect to the temporary foreign worker program, the use of foreign workers has gone up in areas where unemployment is the highest. That tells me two things. There is an abuse of the program, and as the member suggested, the government is quietly letting that abuse pass. That is causing two problems. First, it is forcing wages down by 15%, as was talked about in question period. Second, labour rights are being undermined.

Clearly, the government has not provided funding for adequate skills training for workers to be able to participate in those jobs.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the member from Brampton.

I noticed that the member for Malpeque failed to answer both questions and referred instead to broken spokes in the wheel, but I would have liked a direct answer to both those questions.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to respond to the motion from the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso. The motion is quite timely, as it relates to one of the most significant challenges ahead of us as Canada emerges from the recession and the growing skills mismatch.

Our government's top priority remains job creation, economic growth and long-term prosperity for Canadians. These goals will be more difficult to meet if we do not have a plan to deal with the skills shortages facing the country. It is a real concern right across the nation. That is why I was very pleased to be part of the human resources committee and the study we undertook last year on skills and labour shortages. The study involved the committee travelling to all regions of Canada to directly hear from Canadians about the challenges posed by these skills and labour shortages. In fact, the member for Cape Breton—Canso was part of the committee during that study and heard, as I did, directly from business owners across Canada about the challenges they are facing in finding Canadians to fill available job positions, both in skilled and unskilled positions.

I would like to quote one of the business owners the committee heard from during the study, who was quite clear on this point. The person from the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association stated:

If it weren't for the temporary foreign worker program, some operators would have to close their doors. The [TFW] program has helped our members to stabilize their businesses and retain their domestic employees and has reduced the chaos that resulted from understaffed restaurants.

We heard time and time again statements with respect to why the program is important and why it is particularly needed in western Canada, in my home province, in my home riding of Souris—Moose Mountain.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce, in its report on the top 10 barriers to competitiveness, has identified the skills shortage as the number one obstacle to the success of its members. It says that labour shortages and skills mismatches have become a dominant policy concern among political, business, labour and academic groups over the past six months within Canada and internationally.

We have employers who are looking to offshore resources to hire temporary foreign workers, because they cannot find, for one reason or another, Canadians to do the jobs they need filled, particularly in the high-demand occupations.

Business of Supply

Indeed, we have been quite clear. The original intent of the program was to help employers find temporary help in cases where there were absolute and acute labour shortages. I would invite the member who put forward the motion, and other members, to visit my riding and ridings in Saskatchewan, Alberta and other parts of the country where there is a very acute labour shortage. I know that members from the NDP and Liberals understand the importance of this program to businesses in their ridings. In fact, the member alluded earlier to the fact that letters have been sent to the Minister of Human Resources requesting more temporary foreign workers for businesses in their ridings, even ridings with higher than average unemployment.

That is why Canada's economic action plan 2013 moves forward with key initiatives to address the skills challenge. This includes the creation of the Canada job grant, which would provide \$15,000 or more dollars per person to ensure that Canadians are getting the skills employers are seeking. When fully implemented, the Canada job grant would benefit an estimated 130,000 Canadians.

Budget 2013 would also create more opportunities for apprentices by making it easier for them to get the experience they need to succeed in their chosen professions. It would also provide additional support to under-represented groups, including persons with disabilities, youth, aboriginals and newcomers, to help them find good jobs. These are actions and improvements that must be taken. They are part of our long-term plan to create jobs, growth and prosperity.

However, many Canadian businesses need workers now, and they cannot find workers, no matter how widely they advertise for them. That is why we have the temporary foreign worker program. Canada's temporary foreign worker program is designed to help employers find temporary help in cases where there are absolute and acute labour shortages. That underscores the problem.

● (1530)

Indeed, employers must show that they have made all reasonable efforts to fill the positions locally, and this is the most critical aspect. They need to demonstrate that employing a temporary foreign worker will not adversely affect the Canadian labour market. When jobs are available, Canadians, of course, must have the first crack at these opportunities. We must do what we can to ensure that. To underscore this point, we have announced important changes to the temporary foreign worker program.

As members will recall, last month, the Minister of Finance announced that our government is taking action to reform Canada's temporary worker program to further ensure that Canadians are always given the first crack at job openings. In budget 2013, we have pledged to work with employers to ensure that temporary foreign workers are relied upon only when Canadians cannot fill those jobs. We are committed to increasing the recruitment efforts employers must make to hire Canadians before they are eligible to apply for temporary foreign workers, including increasing the length and reach of their advertising. When they have done that, they must be able to rely upon those workers.

If I heard anything in the hearings across the country, from coast to coast, it was the fact that for Canadian businesses to grow, for our economy to prosper and to ensure jobs, they need to have the people

both in the skilled and unskilled areas to ensure that they can expand their businesses and contribute to our economy.

We will also find ways to ensure that employers have a plan to transition to an all-Canadian workforce over time. We will amend the Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations to restrict the identification of non-official languages as job requirements when employers hire through the temporary foreign worker program. We are proposing to introduce user fees for employers applying for labour market opinions to hire temporary foreign workers so that these costs are no longer borne by taxpayers. These are all reforms our government has already mentioned in the budget speech here in this House.

Our government has already introduced a stronger link between the employment insurance program and the temporary foreign worker program to ensure that Canadians who are looking for work know about local jobs. In fact, the opposition has made a lot of to-do about that fact. It is another means to ensure that Canadians know about jobs and have the first opportunities.

I can assure members that we are concerned and are taking seriously recent reports of the misuse of the temporary foreign worker program. Of course, any misuse should not be tolerated and should be dealt with. HRSDC officials are investigating these allegations, as integrity, fairness and a safe, healthy workplace are the hallmarks of working in Canada. These values do not apply just to Canadian citizens. Foreign workers have the same rights as Canadian workers, including the assurance of at least the same pay for the same work at the same location. That is how the system is meant to work.

Every employer is required to pay temporary foreign workers the same wage paid to Canadian workers doing the same job in the same location, despite anything the opposition would try to say to the contrary. Contrary to some incorrect reports, employers cannot pay temporary foreign workers less than a Canadian would earn in the same job. By upholding these high standards, we will ensure that Canada's economy continues thrive.

Canada is recognized today for its resilience during the global recession and recovery, its low-tax environment, its highly educated and skilled labour force, its natural resource endowments and a financial sector that is the envy of the world. With the initiatives of Canada's economic action plan, we are building on Canada's success in reinforcing the fundamental strengths of the Canadian economy.

Business of Supply

I urge all members of this House to support moving forward with tangible actions by voting against this opposition motion, which tries to create a problem and to do something different, when we have already gone through the process. We have heard from the people. We have taken steps in the budget with respect to reform, which is something they should support. If they would support that, they would see that their concerns have been adequately addressed.

● (1535)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I listened with fascination to my colleague. I am not sure that he is even aware of the fundamental issue here, which is that the foreign worker program was used by RBC such that Canadians were having to train temporary foreign workers, and then RBC was going to outsource them.

The government should have seen the writing on the wall. There are 300,000 positions being used across Canada. When we have high unemployment right across the country, the program is not being used temporarily.

We have a situation with HD Mining, where over 300 Canadians applied for work, and every one of them was turned down, because they did not speak Mandarin. It was going to bring in Chinese miners to mine in British Columbia. I come from a mining region. Canadian miners have a reputation as the best experts in the world. They travel all over the world.

If there is a shortage, there should be job training and apprenticeships. This is completely lacking from the Conservative government.

I would ask the member why the government has completely dropped the ball on HD Mining. Why did it not see this coming? Why are the Conservatives giving us such pitiful excuses now?

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Speaker, a number of initiatives have taken to ensure for those from under-represented groups that I mentioned earlier, for those who need to have their skills upgraded in training and for those who need more education. All of these kinds of investments have been undertaken in the budget so that Canadians in Canada first have an opportunity for those jobs that exist. Will the member undertake to support those measures, as opposed to opposing this measure and opposing the budget from time to time?

With respect to any abuses of the system, of course we do not want any abuses. To the extent there are, they will be dealt with. The minister has clearly indicated that an investigation will take place and that those who are abusing the system will be dealt with.

Furthermore, the finance minister has indicated a number of improvements in the budget, a number of reforms that would make it better. I wonder if the member would support them.

Second, I would ask the member to go to western Canada, to go to my riding, to go to Fort McMurray, to go to places where people have difficulty finding people to do the work that needs to be done after they have advertised all they can advertise. The member can speak to them. He can speak to the owners who spend late nights trying to cover a number of shifts because they do not have the employees to do it, whether they are temporary foreign workers or whether or they are workers from Canada. They cannot find them. They cannot fill those positions.

Perhaps the member should go out there and find out on the ground why the program is so important to western Canadians and to other Canadians, including members of his party who are requesting more temporary foreign workers in their particular ridings.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the problem we have here today is the NDP members do not want to bring in any temporary workers and the Conservatives want to bring anybody in.

The reality is that we need temporary workers. Spring is upon us now. Farmers need these workers. They cannot get enough workers. The question is the criteria.

My question for the hon. member is this: should workers be brought in and other workers fired? That is the question. I think that is what the review is asking. It is asking that we look at the whole system. There are industries that depend upon temporary workers; they should be brought in for those companies, but other companies should not be firing people and using temporary workers in their place.

Why should we not have the review? As well, would the member agree that people should be fired when temporary workers are brought in?

● (1540)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Mr. Speaker, it was the member's party, the Liberal Party, that brought anyone in. We do have criteria for those who need to come in, and those criteria need to be followed.

With respect to reforms that may be taken to ensure that those who actually need temporary foreign workers can have them, there have been specific reforms outlined in the budget, and I will read some of them. It is basically to increase the recruitment efforts that employers must make to hire Canadians before they would be eligible to apply for temporary foreign workers, including increasing the length and reach of advertising. It is all steps to say that first they must ensure that they cannot get a Canadian or someone in Canada to fill the particular position and that they have done that. When they have demonstrated that, then they ought to be able to get that application.

For those who want to replace Canadians who would be there to work, to answer the question more directly, they first have to establish that as a fact. The program was never intended to have temporary foreign workers displace Canadian workers. It was to have those workers fill positions that cannot be filled so that that businesses could grow and expand.

Mr. Phil McColeman (Brant, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today to the opposition motion regarding the temporary foreign worker program. The original intent of this program was to help employers find temporary help in cases where there are absolute and acute labour shortages. Some issues of concern have been raised with the program recently, and as my colleagues and the minister have said, HRSDC is looking into these matters. As a government, we committed in the budget to fixing the program to ensure that Canadians have the first crack at available jobs.

Business of Supply

Let me say a few words about our economic outlook and how we are responding to it in our economic action plan 2013.

In March economists met with the Minister of Finance to discuss the economic outlook as well as the risks associated with it.

One of the variables in business planning is the supply of talent available to meet the demand for skilled labour, and there are currently gaps in that supply in various regions of the country. This is why economic action plan 2013 made strong investments in the skills of Canadians. Since the depth of the recession, Canada has seen over 900,000 net new jobs created. These are predominantly full-time, high-paying private sector jobs. We are acting now to equip Canadians with the skills and training they need to obtain high-quality, well-paying jobs. Unfortunately, the opposition voted against these measures to help Canadians.

The Canada jobs grant will provide up to \$15,000 or more per person to provide training to connect Canadians with a job that is going unfilled.

We are creating opportunities for apprentices by making it easier to get the experience needed to make the leap to journey person status, and we are providing support to under-represented groups, including persons with disabilities, youth, aboriginal people and newcomers, to help them find good jobs in the labour force.

While there are still too many Canadians looking for work, there are regions of this country where employers are unable to find the skills or labour they require to keep their businesses growing. If there is an acute labour shortage, the temporary foreign worker program can assist employers in meeting temporary demands for labour. The reason behind this program is to address the shortages confronted by many regions across Canada.

The Canadian Federation of Independent Business stated in its Business Barometer report that 34% of small and medium-sized companies identified skills shortages as a constraint on growth.

CIBC World Markets reported in December 2012 that 30% of businesses in this country are facing a skilled labour shortage.

It is our responsibility to ensure that employers put Canadians first in line for those job opportunities. Foreign workers can be hired when and only when Canadians or permanent residents are not available or qualified to do the job, but that does not mean the program will help companies make more money by hiring foreign workers at lower wages. This would not be in line with the core principles of the program or with the way it operates.

What are these principles? Canadians must have first priority for job vacancies. While in Canada, temporary foreign workers have the same rights and protections as Canadian workers under the applicable federal or provincial employment standards and labour laws. Foreign workers have to be paid at the same wage as a Canadian worker for the same job in the same location. Let me repeat that, as there appears to be a misunderstanding on this point: employers must prove they pay a temporary foreign worker the same wage they pay a Canadian working for them in that region of the country. They cannot pay less than what they are paying their Canadian employees.

How does the temporary foreign worker program operate? The program is jointly managed by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, or HRSDC, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada, or CIC.

● (1545)

The first step for an employer who wants to use the program is to send an application form to HRSDC requesting permission to hire temporary foreign workers. HRSDC will then issue a labour market opinion to the employer to inform them of the likely impact these foreign workers would have on the Canadian job market. If the labour opinion is favourable and the application is accepted, then CIC will issue a temporary work permit to a foreign worker.

As for the provinces and territories, they are responsible for overseeing working conditions for all workers, including temporary foreign workers.

The temporary foreign worker program answers a real need. The program is driven by the demands of the labour market and the demographics of our changing workforce. As part of their responsibilities, employers are required to advertise and to recruit Canadians whenever and wherever possible.

Finally, we implemented a new wage structure that guarantees that foreign workers and Canadians performing the same job in the same location will be paid identical wages. Using temporary foreign workers to replace already employed Canadian workers is, as has been stated, totally unacceptable. This is not what the program was designed to do, and it will not be tolerated by this government.

Economic action plan 2013 is committed to reform Canada's temporary foreign worker program. We will ensure that there is no confusion about the rules. In the coming months, we will work with employers to ensure that temporary foreign workers are relied upon only when Canadians cannot fill those jobs. We will ensure that employers make intensive recruitment efforts to hire Canadians before they apply for temporary foreign workers. We will require employers to present a plan to transition to an all-Canadian workforce over time and we will propose the introduction of a user fee for employers applying to use temporary foreign workers through the labour market opinion process.

However, it is our government's goal to ensure employers can find qualified workers here in Canada and fill these jobs. This is why the investments in training were key to budget 2013. Unfortunately, the opposition voted against these investments in Canadian skills. While I can appreciate the concerns of the members across the way, as the government shares many of those same concerns, I cannot support this motion.

Business of Supply

The human resources committee has studied the labour market and travelled to all parts of the nation. I was part of and I am a member of the HRSDC committee on human resources. We did travel across the country, as my colleague said in his speech earlier. We did talk to employers. We did talk to people involved in various industries across this country, including small business operators, medium-size and large business operators, and they all, to a person, said the biggest problem they will be facing now and in the future, depending on the part of the country they were in, will be to fill the jobs that would be available in their businesses for both unskilled and skilled labour.

The work has been done, as has been mentioned, and therefore we proposed the reforms in our budget. Our government is proposing concrete actions to improve this program to ensure Canadians come first. The time to act is now; therefore, I urge all members to vote against the motion and instead to support our proposed changes to the program.

• (1550)

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I commend my hon. colleague for his speech, but I have to point out that his logic is fundamentally flawed, because he says the government is going to take certain actions to fix the situation as if Conservatives only just discovered there was a problem.

The problem is that since the government was elected in 2006, the number of temporary foreign workers has gone up steadily from 140,000 to 340,000, so the Conservatives have known about this problem for at least seven years, or at least four years if we take the date of the Auditor General's report in 2009.

It is not "Whoops, we have a problem"; we have a deliberately created situation of a massive increase of temporary foreign workers, deliberately created by the rules and lack of implementation of the rules by the Conservative government over many years. The idea that Conservatives have suddenly discovered the problem and are going to fix it makes zero sense at all.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for his question, but he is absolutely incorrect in saying that this is a situation created by government. This is a situation created by the need of companies, especially in certain regions of the country. I can say from having been on the committee and travelling across the country, particularly in western Canada where there are acute shortages, that businesses would actually have to close their doors if temporary foreign workers were not available to them.

I might say that, if anything, the increases the member mentioned are driven by members of his caucus, like the members for Sydney—Victoria, Winnipeg North, Random—Burin—St. George's, Mount Royal and Cape Breton—Canso, who ask the minister for permission to bring in temporary foreign workers. That is what has driven it. It is driven by the need in this country and by persons from your side of the House.

The Deputy Speaker: I would again remind members that comments are to be directed to the Chair, not individual members. It is not my side of the House or that of the person standing in this position in the alternative.

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Hamilton East—Stoney Creek.

Mr. Wayne Marston (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as a member of the finance committee, I travelled the country and heard some of the same things you are referring to, that there were some high-skilled jobs—

The Deputy Speaker: This has been happening over the last three hours. I would ask all members to be conscious of the fact that they need to direct their comments to the Chair, not other members.

Mr. Wayne Marston: Mr. Speaker, through you to my friend, I travelled with the finance committee and heard those reports, but the high-skilled jobs were supposed to be temporarily filled by foreign workers. When government turns to the folks in parts of our country like the east coast where they have seasonal work and tells them there is a labour market assessment, which permits temporary foreign workers in McDonald's or Tim Hortons, it is taking away the very jobs that the EI changes were trying to push the workers into. Therefore, the low-skilled jobs are not even there because of the mishandling of this.

In Canada there are 338,000 temporary foreign workers, more than the annual immigration rate to this country. The situation being created with that is pressure to push wages down.

Mr. Phil McColeman: Mr. Speaker, my apologies if I was not directing my comments through you to the House.

Through you, to answer this question, as was mentioned, there is recognition on the government side that reform is required. That is what is outlined in the budget and was outlined in my speech in terms of the steps that need to be taken. However, as he has articulated in his question, no one can deny the fact that there are both unskilled and skilled needs in this country that are not being met by Canadian workers. Therefore, the temporary foreign worker program has a definite place in Canada and fills a need. It should not be abused, and our government is taking steps to ensure it will not be abused through the reforms we have put in the budget.

• (1555)

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I would like to share my time with my colleague, the member for Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel.

I would like to begin where I left off on my question to the previous speaker. The thesis of my remarks is that the proposition put forward by the government is fundamentally flawed and illogical. Let me begin by stating what its proposition is, and then I want to explain why I claim it to be flawed and illogical.

The government claims that the purpose of the temporary foreign worker program is to provide only temporary work and only where there is an extreme labour shortage. Then the government talks as if it is suddenly surprised, whoops, that there is a problem out there. We have 340,000 temporary foreign workers, and in 2006 we only had 140,000. Then the government announced reforms, as of this budget.

That makes no sense, because this surge in temporary foreign workers was in fact a deliberate creation of the government since it came into power in 2006. Since that time we have gone from 140,000 to 340,000, over an unfortunate period of seven long years of Conservative government. Over that time, it has deliberately caused that number to grow exponentially.

It is not as if the government was not warned earlier. It was taken to task by the Auditor General in 2009. What did it do? The government expressed concern and said it would review, and it said it a number of times. However, nothing has changed.

My point is that this is not a problem that the Conservatives have just discovered. This is a problem it has deliberately created since it came to office.

[Translation]

I repeat, this is not a new problem. This is a problem that the Conservative government has deliberately created since it came to office.

[English]

I note that even though the numbers have gone from 140,000 to 338,000, that might be explainable if we had a sudden drop in unemployment and an increase in labour shortages. However, the unemployment rate today is in fact higher than it was in 2006, and the overall vacancy rate in the economy, according to Bank of Canada figures, is approximately the same as it has been on average over the past 20 years.

The next question is this. If the Conservatives deliberately created this crisis over the last seven years, why and how? To answer that question I think we need a little historical perspective.

The temporary foreign worker program was brought in many years ago by a Liberal government and, in my opinion, if properly managed, it is a very good and very valuable program. However, the way it was managed under Liberal governments was that we had to achieve a balance between the interests of employers, the interests of Canadian workers and the interests of foreign workers. As long as that balance is maintained across these three groups, it is a very successful program. In terms of Canadian workers, those workers had to have first call for available jobs. The current government, self-evidently, has failed to achieve this.

In terms of the temporary foreign workers, they had to be treated fairly and be subject to the same laws as other Canadian workers. The government has violated that, because now, under certain circumstances, temporary foreign workers can be paid 15% less than the going wage. Third, the interests of employers have to be looked after, because in certain circumstances and in certain sectors, like agriculture for example, there are clearly labour shortages, there are clearly some jobs that cannot be filled by Canadians and there is a clear need for temporary foreign workers. As long as the system is managed in a balanced way, respecting the interests of all of those three groups, then it is a good program.

The problem with the Conservatives, and the reason the program has become a big mess since they came to power in 2006, is that they no longer had a balanced approach. They gave all the weight to the employers and none of the weight to the Canadian and foreign

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workers. The Conservatives just listened to employers, turned a blind eye and turned their back on stuff so that employers could get whatever they wanted.

I do not blame the employers. Employers are out there to make money, and if the government turns a blind eye and lets them covertly do what they are not really supposed to do, a lot of employers will do it. The problem is the administration of the system by the government. I do not blame employers for taking advantage of deliberate government laxness; I blame the government for creating that laxness in the first place, for deliberately building up these numbers to unprecedented levels and for totally disrespecting the rights of Canadian and foreign workers.

There are a couple of other issues I would like to mention. First, in terms of the unwarranted influx of these foreign workers, I have a high-tech riding and I have received letters from a number of my constituents who work in the tech sector. One of my constituents wrote:

These Indian/Multinational companies are proving to Immigration that skills are not available but this is not true. All the skills are available in abundance locally and it is only the work of the Immigration lawyers who cook the application to make it look like the skills are not available.

The government allows these immigration lawyers to get these phony stories in and immediately allows these foreign workers in to displace people like my Canadian constituent in Markham.

There is also the question of immigration through landed immigrants, who ultimately become citizens and raise their family in this country, versus temporary immigration through temporary foreign workers or what are sometimes called "guest workers" in certain European countries. We in the Liberal Party have a preference for the first category of immigration. We think the way to build our country is to bring people in from foreign lands, let them settle here, let them become citizens and let them raise their family. We acknowledge that temporary foreign workers have an important role, but the fact that these temporary foreign workers have gone up to 340,000, which is more than the annual intake of regular immigrants, is not good for the structure of immigration for this country. As I said earlier, that is a deliberate plan by the Conservatives to create this situation.

● (1600)

[Translation]

Lastly, it is not good for the poorest countries in the world. Consider a poor country like Bangladesh, which imports products from countries like China and India. Given that China and India will now have to pay higher tariffs, the products that Bangladesh exports to Canada will now cost more.

[English]

In other words, what the current government is doing is not only penalizing China and India, but it is also penalizing the very poorest countries of the world.

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So for all of these reasons, in conclusion I will say that the Conservative government's explanation is totally illogical, that this is not a problem the Conservatives have just discovered but a problem they have deliberately created over their period in office, and they have deliberately created it because they have given zero weight to Canadian and foreign workers and all the weight to the companies.

Mr. Andrew Cash (Davenport, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is important to remember that many temporary foreign workers could have, in a previous era in Canadian history, become permanent residents. We have always said that temporary foreign workers who come into this country should be accorded that opportunity.

The current government has let immigrants down time and time again. In Toronto, we have taxi drivers with Ph.D.s in civics who cannot get a job because companies are not recognizing their work experience. At the same time, these same companies are bringing in temporary foreign workers. What is actually happening is that Canadian citizens' own credentials are not being recognized while we bring in temporary foreign workers.

It is also important to underline the fact that, while we have serious issues with this program, we stand for the protection of rights for all workers in Canada. Whether they are temporary foreign workers, permanent residents or citizens of this country, we would like to see them all become active and contributing members of our country, if they choose to.

My question is for the hon. member from the Liberal Party. How is it that we could have in Toronto tens of thousands of immigrants with highly skilled qualifications and they cannot find jobs that are obviously available?

• (1605)

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, there is much on which I agree with my colleague. I certainly believe that all workers, whether foreign or Canadian, should be treated with fairness. That was a point I made in my speech.

I also believe it should be far easier for temporary workers to get on a path to permanent immigrant status and citizenship. A very small fraction of these temporary foreign workers achieve that permanent status and that is because the administration of the program by the government is barring those people from permanent citizenship.

Finally, the member talked about people with credentials having problems. That has been an issue for many years. However, I would point out that the determination of rules on credentials is up to provincial governments.

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, Ind.): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member raised a good point. However, I was surprised that he did not focus a bit more on what for me is the biggest issue here. Sometimes it does make sense to have a temporary foreign worker program in certain areas where there are a few shortages, but why 15% less?

In contradiction to what has been stated across the aisle, to quote the original statement from a year ago about this change in the program, it not only talked about 15% less than the market average but “substantially less than Canadians”.

How does hon. member feel about this race to the bottom internationally, to discount what is already a low minimum wage in large parts of Canada?

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, perhaps I was not totally clear, but I stated in my speech that I agreed with him. I said that under the Liberal government, we had a balanced approach which protected the rights of Canadian workers, foreign workers and companies. We naturally oppose a system where temporary foreign workers can be paid 15% less than their Canadian counterparts in certain circumstances. Therefore, I agree with him on that point.

Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to share with colleagues and my colleague from Markham this email, which states, “I work in IT for CIBC where the displacement of full time employees by onshore foreign workers is completely out of control”. She goes on to state, “As in the RBC case, these employees have trained foreign workers to do their jobs before they were let go. Once again, these foreign workers are no better trained and do not have any more skills than the full-time employees they've displaced”.

I would be interested in the hon. member's comments on that email.

Hon. John McCallum: Mr. Speaker, I read out a quote from one of my constituents who worked in the high tech sector that said something very similar to the member's correspondence. Therefore, I have been exposed to the same views.

The program needs to be fixed in a major way and it is the government's fault for running it in a lax way for the last seven years.

It is way too late for the Conservatives to think it is just a problem beginning now. They should have done this back in 2009, at least when the auditor general came out with her report, if not before.

• (1610)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Massimo Pacetti (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak today to my party's motion, moved by my colleague, the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso. The motion is lengthy, but very clear:

That the House recognize that the use of temporary foreign workers to replace Canadian workers in jobs Canadians are qualified and able to do is an abuse of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, and that it is the government's responsibility to ensure that this program is not abused in a way which threatens the wellbeing of Canadian workers and the Canadian economy; that a special committee be appointed, with a mandate to conduct hearings on this critical issue, to hear from Canadians affected by this practice, and to propose solutions to strengthen the rules around the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to prevent abuse;...

It is a very simple motion. It is not too complicated and everyone should be able to get behind it. However, we see that the Conservatives are against the motion. We still do not know where the NDP stands on it, but I believe that certain MPs will vote in favour of the motion.

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The rest of the motion is rather technical. It talks about the composition of the committee, which will be formed in the same manner as all other committees. It will have to report its recommendations to the House on June 19. At least we are calling for action and proposing measures in order to get answers.

It goes without saying that the topic of temporary foreign workers is a hot-button issue. Many Canadians, including my constituents, are worried about losing their jobs to temporary foreign workers who work for minimum wage.

The story of the temporary foreign workers hired by RBC—and other similar stories making headlines—to replace Canadian workers has, not surprisingly, made headlines recently. Should we be concerned about foreign workers? Should the program be reformed? Does the program work? That is what we would like to know.

This issue raises a number of questions. A number of people will want to share their point of view, which is largely based on their ideology and their personal beliefs. As parliamentarians, we have to set aside our opinions when dealing with such a complex issue. We must first acknowledge that there is a problem.

When the number of temporary foreign workers doubles in six years, increasing by almost 200,000 during an economic crisis, we have to ask ourselves some serious questions. More than 33,000 organizations have recruited temporary foreign workers over the past few years, while the unemployment rate has gone up exponentially across Canada.

A number of business leaders will say that they use temporary foreign workers to address our skills shortage. That is often the case and that is why the former Liberal government created the temporary foreign workers program. The primary purpose of the program was to complement the Canadian labour force, not to replace it. For instance, we know that the farming community must often hire temporary workers in the summer to fill positions that not many Canadians want or are able to fill. That is perfectly acceptable, since summer does not last long in Canada. That is when the program is needed.

However, when one in seven jobs created since the Conservatives came to power is filled by a temporary foreign worker, while the unemployment rate is on the rise, there is clearly a problem.

Creating a special committee made up of members of all recognized parties will make it possible to examine the issue in more detail. I think the Conservatives should have no reason to fear hearing the facts in a committee where they will have a majority anyway. Let me add that, if they are acting in good faith, they will agree with us and vote in favour of our motion.

● (1615)

The figures show that there is a problem. Why do we have this situation? Some people say that businesses are using temporary foreign workers to boost their profits and lower their costs. Others have raised the issue of relocating operations to other countries. Companies are bringing in foreign workers from those countries to train and prepare them here prior to relocating.

Although not actually permitted by the program, it seems that a number of businesses have found ways to get around the program

requirements and to use it to hire foreign workers for lower pay. This is the accusation heard most often, as demonstrated by the RBC case. We have just heard about another example at the CIBC, and there are others. This explains the hiring of temporary foreign workers by these businesses.

Although I do not wish to comment on the RBC case, I will nevertheless ask the question: is it true that corporations are using the program to reduce costs? Can this program be circumvented to hire employees who will work for less? Are these accusations baseless? It is difficult to say whether or not these accusations are true. However, a special committee would provide the answers to these questions without falling into the trap of ideology and simplistic answers.

Some newspapers have quoted lawyers who run specialized immigration firms and who have an interest in this program being maintained. They say it is a myth that it is cheaper to hire temporary foreign workers. However, other legal experts say the opposite. Other experts say that businesses do use the program to hire cheaper labour, as confirmed by the United Steelworkers.

This program allows employers to pay temporary foreign workers 15% less than Canadian workers working in the same sector. These foreign workers are also less able to combat abuse since they are not familiar with their rights and have a hard time forming a union, for example.

My NDP colleagues are opposed to the creation of a committee and moved their own motion on the grounds that the committee will be made up mainly of Conservatives and will not achieve anything. I see that as bad faith. There is a majority of Conservatives in the House. The Conservatives can just as easily oppose the NDP motion, which completely invalidates their argument. The problem is that both the Conservatives and the New Democrats are prisoners of their ideologies, which dictate simplistic responses based on opinion instead of fact. A committee would allow us to question different experts who will provide information on the extent of the problem and will help us bring in solutions that work.

The issues of wages and hiring temporary foreign workers instead of Canadians are not our only concerns. We are also concerned that the use of temporary foreign workers will open the door for companies to relocate and that they will use the program to train foreign replacement workers before the company relocates. This also enables companies to quietly get rid of local workers—who are often unionized, organized and able to get media attention—and replace them with foreign workers we will never hear about again in the media, before the company relocates a service five years later to a country with cheaper labour.

The Conservatives like signing bilateral free trade agreements with other countries, but they must also consider the fact that these treaties make relocation an option. They must ensure that businesses will not be able to use the temporary foreign worker program to make relocation easier. This is a very complicated issue that could be examined by the special committee we are proposing today.

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I urge all members to support the motion. As we have said, the Conservatives mismanaged the program, and all of the promised reviews were nothing but lip service, since no progress has been made in months or even years.

• (1620)

[English]

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, what is really clear to Canadians is that there are major problems with this temporary foreign worker program. There are also major problems for the people who are being brought over to Canada.

I have helped small businesses that have utilized the program. People were brought in from other countries who were trained and ended up taking managerial positions. They were in fast food positions because with the mining boom they could not find local people, yet once they were trained the government deported them. Industry asked me why we are creating a disposable class of workers.

The Conservative government seems to think it is okay to have disposable people, but we need immigration in parts of our country that are growing. We want to bring in families, we want them to invest here, buy houses here, and go to school here. We do not want to treat them as though they are disposable and discard them.

At the same time this program is being used to undermine wages. It is being used so that companies do not need to invest in training. They do not need apprentices when 300,000 people can be brought in and spread around the country. This is a rip and ship attitude to our economy.

My hon. colleague has been watching the Conservatives all day. They have been acting like rubes at a country fair. They seem to be surprised that there are problems. This has been known. Why has the government done nothing to address the growing abuse of the system?

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Mr. Speaker, that was a well thought out question. There were a lot of aspects in it. Obviously I did not have a chance to address all of the points that I wanted to address. That is why we are calling for a special committee.

It has been a huge surprise as to how the Conservatives have been responding. They have admitted that there is a problem but they said they have solved the problem. Maybe they will solve the problem in the future if they do not solve it today and if we have not solved it with the next budget. We do not really see anything in the budget. All they talk about is training but training is going to be implemented over the next two years. That is another temporary fix for temporary workers.

There are huge problems. Everybody who has stood up in the House has brought up a different point. Here we are still debating when we should just go straight to the vote and get the committee on board and get working as parliamentarians. Let the experts tell us what needs to be done to repair this.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to pick up on one of the themes of the earlier question asked by the NDP member and that is with respect to temporary foreign workers coming here as opposed to people coming here as permanent immigrants with permanent immigrant status. We really have moved

away from family reunification and creating an immigrant who is loyal and dedicated to Canada and has an interest in staying here for a long time.

The temporary foreign worker is absolutely necessary in certain circumstances, particularly in the agricultural industry and seasonal work. I have been to the Holland Marsh. The program is used there effectively, properly, and in compliance with all the rules and regulations. I am talking about the other hundreds of thousands who have increased over the years under Conservative rule.

Would you not agree that people should be coming over here with the idea of becoming engaged Canadians with the hope of citizenship?

The Deputy Speaker: I would point out it does not matter whether I agree or not. Again I would remind all members to direct their comments to the Chair, not to individual members.

The hon. member for Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel.

Mr. Massimo Pacetti: Mr. Speaker, the answer to the member's question is easy. It is absolutely. This country is based on immigration. Without immigration where would we be? Every year the population goes up based on immigration. Tons of people have settled here from other countries and they want to bring their families over. Sometimes they do not necessarily have their citizenship or even their permanent residency. They may be refugee claimants. Ninety-nine times out of one hundred, these are model citizens. These people hold one, two, and three jobs whenever they can, sometimes at minimum wage. Their kids are model students. These people know if they have two strikes against them they are out. They come here to turn their life around and help Canada be the country that it is today.

Nobody here is opposed to temporary workers. I have not heard anybody say anything against them. We are opposed to the Conservatives not having a plan. They have no plans for anything. Forget about them having an economic plan. In the same way they have no plan for anything, they sure have no plan for temporary workers.

• (1625)

[Translation]

The Deputy Speaker: Order. 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 Etobicoke North, The Environment; the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie, International Co-operation; the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusking, Aboriginal Affairs.

[English]

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to say at the beginning that I will be sharing my time with my colleague, the hon. member for Saint-Lambert.

I should also say that I fully intend to support the resolution, its emphasis on abuses of the temporary foreign worker program, and abuse that amounts to threats to the well-being of Canadian workers and the Canadian economy. I can well support the premise along the lines of what some of my colleagues have already been arguing.

Business of Supply

Frankly, I would like to speak about another form of abuse, the abuse of temporary foreign workers themselves and how that fits into the overall scheme of the concerns in the motion. The fact of the matter is that evidence is now suggesting that the temporary foreign worker program has been and is being used in a way that is bringing in temporary foreign workers to situations that place them in very vulnerable workplace environments. It is not being used in the way that was originally envisaged. It is not being used in a way that, for example, would be bringing in highly skilled workers where perhaps the abuse potential in their workplaces might be less than in other areas.

The Alberta Federation of Labour did some research for the period of April to December 2012 on labour market opinions. Out of 4,800 labour market opinions issued in that period, 2,400, fully half, 50% were for low skilled jobs. The extra abuse potential, with the problem of how the temporary foreign worker system is now working, is I hope obvious with that statistic.

The mere fact that the Royal Bank of Canada tried what it tried, and was given permission by the government to do what it tried, shows how the system can be used to gut existing jobs. Why would that be? That would be because existing jobs probably are staffed by people whose benefits and workplace conditions are somehow or other getting in the way of the corporate project. There is no other reason to think that RBC would be getting rid of 35 people, who already had the same jobs that they were going to be hired for, if it did not think it would get some benefits at the level of workplace conditions, salaries, etc.

I want to focus on proper compliance and enforcement issues, including the importance of working with the provinces to ensure that temporary foreign workers are not subjected to abuse in the workplace and also more broadly. On that point I will speak about the issue of deportation as well.

I am very privileged to be able to report that at the recent NDP convention this past weekend in Montreal, youth members of the Toronto—Danforth Riding Association proposed to the New Democratic Party to add a clause to the policy book on precisely the kind of issue that is raised by the motion today.

It was tabled, debated on the floor, and passed. It was introduced by a youth member of the NDP. It said, “Be it resolved that the following clause be added” to the NDP policy book to already eight clauses on temporary foreign workers. It read, “working with foreign embassies of sending countries to ensure temporary foreign workers coming to Canada are informed of their rights”, a concrete measure. Then, “working with the provinces to institute a licensing system for foreign recruiters (as is done in Manitoba)”. And “a registration system for employers of temporary foreign workers”. Finally it said, “providing access to federal hearings for temporary foreign workers who face deportation”.

This is now NDP policy, having been virtually unanimously, if not unanimously, voted by over 2,000 delegates at the NDP convention on Sunday.

Allow me with the same pride, as the MP for Toronto—Danforth and for the NDP youth, to refer to the introductory remarks made by Andre Fast on behalf of the riding association when introducing the

motion. He wanted the 2,000 or so delegates to consider the following considerations. He told them that “many temporary foreign workers coming to Canada simply face exploitation of various forms. They are sometimes cheated by unscrupulous recruiters who make big promises they then do not deliver on. When the migrant workers get here, they are often, not always—there are many good employers, of course—they often face inadequate housing, inadequate training, and poor wages.”

● (1630)

He said, “Some migrant workers are often exposed to some of the most dangerous working conditions in Canada.” Frankly, the way this system works, in some cases that may be the reason they are being brought in. If they are injured on the job or if they complain about working conditions, it often results in their deportation. This suggests to me that quite often that very fact is the reason many temporary foreign workers refrain from complaining about their job conditions.

He said, “United Food and Commercial Workers, UFCW, has been doing tremendous work over the years to help these workers and our economy, but the government itself needs to do more to protect them.” Putting measures in place to ensure recruiters and employers of temporary workers can be held accountable will help protect them, such as the measures suggested and that are now part of the NDP policy. No worker should be injured on the job and then, as my colleague for Timmins—James Bay remarked, simply disposed of. This is why we also need “federal hearings for temporary foreign workers who face deportation”.

As New Democrats, we stood up on Sunday for the most vulnerable members of our society in adopting this resolution, and I have to say that I am very proud of the NDP youth who put forward this resolution at the convention. They seemed to understand the nature of this particular challenge far better than the Conservative government, which has been promising a review for some time. Not only have the Conservatives failed to keep that promise, they also are now continuing the abusive system that we have seen come to light in the last few weeks.

Manitoba has been governed for four successive terms by an NDP government. In April 2009, it introduced a system that is being used as the model in the motion just passed at the NDP convention. Manitoba's Worker Recruitment and Protection Act now has provisions and regulations that do a number of very important things which are needed across the country. This is why we need to have collaboration with the federal government in the nature of this temporary foreign worker program.

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The first thing is that foreign worker recruitment agencies have to be registered and licensed by the province in order to do that recruitment. Second, they are prohibited from charging fees for the recruitment to the foreign workers themselves. Third, employers must register with the province, and that is not just the recruiters but the employers. Once they are registered, they can then work with the province to receive direct assistance benefiting from the province's network of international partnerships to source appropriate foreign workers in the right context. Finally, employers and recruitment agencies have to have detailed records about the place of employment, workers' duties, wages, and up-to-date contact information.

At the time that this was adopted, the president of the United Food and Commercial Workers, Wayne Hanley, said the following:

By keeping a registry of where these workers are, who recruited them and what they were promised when they were hired, you finally have a jurisdiction with the political will and regulations to penalize and weed out employers and recruiters who abuse foreign workers.

What is going on in Manitoba is a model of collaboration and co-operation between government, labour, and business, and we very much believe that the government side of this must be expanded. We need federal co-operation with the provinces to make sure this kind of scheme is rolled out across the country and for the kinds of contacts with foreign governments and embassies to make sure that workers come knowing that they do have rights and the ways in which they can go about seeking to enforce them.

Finally, I would like to end by saying that what we are seeing in the last few weeks coming to light again, and it was not as if it was not known more generally, is part of a bigger picture. This is not just about temporary foreign workers or that particular slice of our economy, but also about the organization of the entire economy and a particular ideology and set of attitudes that lie behind the way the Conservative government thinks about economics.

We are looking at a kind of “migrantization” of the economy. If we look at the unemployment insurance system and all of the recent so-called reforms, they are basically intended to create a more atomized society of workers who are forced to move further and further afield to find jobs of at least the same wage that they had before. They have to actually leave their region or go within an hour of where they used to work to receive any benefits. The way in which workers are being forced to think of themselves as completely mobile units to move around the country—be damned, so to speak, with respect to the effects on community and family—is part of the same picture.

• (1635)

I believe this motion deserves support. Its references to the abuse of the system and of Canadian workers are well-founded, but the abuse of temporary foreign workers themselves has to be built into our understanding of why we are voting for the motion.

Mr. Chris Alexander (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, would the member not agree that labour mobility in a well-functioning labour market is a fundamental principle of a market economy? He claimed at the NDP convention that there were some breakthroughs on the policy front. Does the NDP now agree that a functioning labour market has to involve labour flexibility and labour mobility over the long-term, especially in an advanced economy such as Canada's?

Second, the member has spoken a lot about abuse. On this side of the House, we are determined to root out abuse and flouting of the regulations wherever we find it. However, would he not agree that the vast majority of Canadian employers that depend on temporary foreign workers in agriculture and other sectors have done a very good job of respecting the rules of that system? This is true of all those employers in my riding.

We have a firm and excellent foundation in the country to build on the success of the program for future generations.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, frankly, I am afraid I cannot answer the second question well, because I do not know what situations the hon. member is aware of. As a general premise, the fact that most employers are good employers and try to be good employers is probably a good place to start.

The fact is that we do not really know the way the system is being organized. The potential for abuse by employers to do what they might not otherwise do is there to a much greater extent than it should be. My colleague from Markham—Unionville just made a very similar point.

I would like to think that what the member has said is true and that it is by far the norm that there is no abuse. However, we very much need to double-check that in light of what we now know about the ways in which the system can be abused.

On labour mobility, and who can be against labour mobility, the fundamental component has to be worker choice and not coercion. The whole system is being built far too much around a lack of choice built in to the mobility policy.

Mr. Frank Valeriote (Guelph, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I agree with many of the comments of the member for Toronto—Danforth. However, I would like to clarify his position and the position of the NDP with respect to the use of temporary foreign workers for agricultural purposes, particularly temporary foreign workers who come in the summer to help our agricultural industry which trains these temporary foreign workers and which brings them back year after year? Often, the same temporary foreign worker will come in to do jobs that frankly Canadians will not do.

I would like to clarify the member's position on that matter.

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, I can only speak for myself. I am not aware of any particular NDP policy on the agricultural workers. I am completely in favour of that where there is a need. I am completely in favour of workers being treated humanely and virtually, as the form of the member's question might suggest, as members of the family on many of these farms. That is not at all where the problem lies.

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I would add, though, that I very much believe these workers should have the right to be unionized and to bargain collectively. I am very disappointed that the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the Ontario government's refusal to do so in a recent case last year. I would very much be in favour of these agricultural workers and what jobs and Canada can do for them and their families, but they should be here with a full set of rights.

• (1640)

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher for a short question.

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the member opposite's comment about how there is not a problem with this program gives a false sense of security. Has the hon. member, who lives in the Toronto area, not seen this classified ad on Kijiji? I just saw this ad, which reads as follows:

[*English*]

"We hire foreign workers to work in Alberta and Saskatchewan".

[*Translation*]

The ad was posted by a staffing agency that says that it can find jobs for people.

[*English*]

Our company Wellcareplacements is hiring individuals who have work experience in fastfood counter attendant, to work in McDonald, Boston Pizza, Dairy Queen, Tim Hortons, Subways and more.

Is this specific? This is totally an abuse of the system. Am I right here?

Mr. Craig Scott: Mr. Speaker, I would only say that the member's question was framed in such a way that basically does not need to be answered. It speaks for itself.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for Cape Breton—Canso for his motion, which gives us the opportunity to speak to the issue of foreign workers and give it the attention it deserves.

It is a good sign that the Liberals are finally reacting and acknowledging that the temporary foreign worker program does not work and needs to undergo changes.

Over the past few weeks, a number of irregularities and controversies have been brought to our attention and have made headlines.

The one thing they all have in common is the fact that large companies are using the generous nature of the temporary foreign worker program to their short-term financial gain and to the detriment of Canadian workers.

Royal Bank is the first company that comes to mind. It found itself in the spotlight after laying off 45 permanent Canadian IT workers and replacing them with temporary foreign workers.

This is not a question of lack of workers. The positions were already filled. There was no reason to hire temporary foreign workers.

However, it seems that RBC was able to benefit from loopholes in the temporary foreign worker program to threaten its employees' job security and drive down their salaries.

The case of HD Mining also demonstrates the program's inadequacies. In 2012, the Conservative government allowed the company to hire 201 Chinese miners on the grounds that the company could not meet its labour needs.

However, more than 300 people had applied for jobs with the company. They were turned down because HD Mining decided that speaking Mandarin was an essential qualification. Obviously, it was a way for the company to cut salary costs and take job security away from workers.

Just like RBC, HD Mining benefited from the generous nature of the temporary foreign worker program, to the detriment of Canadian workers. Just like RBC, it also circumvented the intent of the federal temporary foreign worker program with complete impunity. Foreign workers should not be shouldering the blame for these irregularities; the Conservatives should. They are the ones who encouraged it with their laissez-faire attitude and poor program management.

Our current economic situation is still fragile. While hundreds of thousands of Canadians are currently looking for work, the federal temporary foreign worker program must address labour shortages and not allow foreign workers to be hired to the detriment of Canadian workers.

That is the spirit of this program. It is supposed to address a temporary business need that cannot be fulfilled by the Canadian workforce. It is not meant to allow employers to reduce their payroll costs because they can pay foreign workers 15% less than Canadian workers.

Today the Conservatives are saying that Canadian workers should be given preferential treatment, while the number of temporary foreign workers has tripled, rising from 101,000 to 338,000 in the past 10 years. That number rose from 100,000 to 160,000 under the Liberals, and then it doubled under the Conservatives.

Considering that we have gone through an economic crisis and that 1.4 million Canadians are unemployed, these actions are irresponsible.

Saying one thing and doing the opposite for years on end is clearly hypocrisy. This government brought in incentives for hiring temporary foreign workers. It deliberately left the program's weaknesses in place and it allows large corporations to take advantage of the system, at the expense of Canadian workers.

The direction the Conservatives are taking is having a direct impact on Canadians. It is creating employment uncertainty in this country, as well as pushing down wages and creating a race to the bottom for all workers.

In the end, all employees and unemployed workers will be affected by these practices.

Our current global reality raises many questions about the federal temporary foreign worker program and about the government's intentions.

Business of Supply

We have to reflect carefully on what direction this program needs to take.

● (1645)

Clearly, this reflection must be carried out with a view to developing a more effective federal temporary foreign worker program that better meets the needs of the public instead of those of large corporations.

The solution proposed by the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso would make it possible to consult the public and to have the opinions of stakeholders and analysts. It could make it possible to take the temporary foreign worker program in a better direction, but this Liberal motion may well not yield very convincing results, because we need tangible measures.

It is essential that we find ways to make the program more true to its spirit. We must examine the ideas to improve the effectiveness of processes as well as those to strengthen respect for temporary foreign workers' rights. Actually, that is what we did at our last convention by adopting a resolution promoting co-operation with the embassies of the countries covered in the temporary foreign worker program, in order to improve the transfer of information to temporary foreign workers.

We also proposed the creation of a registration system for employers hiring temporary foreign workers in order to improve the verification of information. In addition, a long time ago, we voted in favour of repealing the provision allowing companies to pay temporary foreign workers 15% less than Canadian workers. We are also in favour of tightening the rules around the temporary foreign worker program to ensure that its precepts will not be violated.

But the proposal of the hon. member for Cape Breton—Canso can only be valid if the Conservatives finally agree to honour their commitments to the program, commitments that they have broken for years. The Liberals would also need to take a clear position and stop the double-talk, just like the government representatives.

Our duty is to promote our country's economy by serving the interests of all Canadians, but the Conservatives and Liberals need to demonstrate a real will to do so—the will New Democrats have.

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the support that seems to be coming from the NDP in terms of voting in favour of the motion. I do take exception to some of the comments with regard to the Liberal Party.

It was the Liberal Party that created the idea and the thought during the seventies. It was the Liberal Party that refined the program back in 2001-02. It is the Liberal Party that has recognized the valuable contributions this program has made to Canada, both in economic success and the potential for those workers who come from abroad to be in Canada. It is a win-win situation as we see the benefits in ensuring that the process is respected. That is really what we are looking for today, a committee that would go out and do the consultations necessary to ensure the integrity of the program is maintained, going forward. Canada cannot afford to lose this very important program.

At times, I am of the opinion that the NDP does not support the program. We just have to take a look at what its leader said yesterday in question period. However, my question for the member is this. Does the NDP support this program and if it does support the program, does it have any sense whatsoever in terms of four or five years from now on an overall—

● (1650)

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Saint-Lambert.

[Translation]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for the question.

We are absolutely not disparaging this program. I want to reiterate that that is not our intention. Even though the Liberals are saying that it was their party that created this program, the fact remains that the program is being abused because of a lack of safeguards and oversight. That is what we want to talk about and that is what we are proposing.

As I said in my speech, we absolutely must implement these safeguards and an audit system to prevent these abuses and allow this program to do what it was intended to do.

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate my colleague for her very interesting speech and for the work she does on immigration.

Today I would like to know whether she agrees with the fact that this program can be useful. It has been in the past and still is at times, but it has some flaws that sometimes allow employers—and I am not judging them—to abuse the program and use it to try to reduce their costs and the salaries of their employees. They use foreign workers who agree to be paid less than Canadian workers. Sometimes, Canadian workers are qualified and able to do these jobs, but, unfortunately, they are replaced by employees who get paid a lower wage.

Does the hon. member think this is currently a problem that we should be addressing as soon as possible?

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, we are now realizing what has happened under this program. We should not lose sight of the fact that the Conservatives have completely mismanaged the temporary foreign worker program and Canadians are paying the price.

Furthermore, some of my other colleagues have also raised the fact that the fundamental rights of all workers must be promoted and protected. Paying a temporary foreign worker 15% less than a Canadian worker erodes these rights.

This program is worthwhile. We must keep it, but we must also redefine it.

[English]

The Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I understand that the government House leader has some business he wishes to bring before the House.

The hon. government House leader.

FAMILY HOMES ON RESERVES AND MATRIMONIAL INTERESTS OR RIGHTS ACT

BILL S-2—NOTICE OF TIME ALLOCATION MOTION

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have a few points. First, for far too long, women living on first nation reserves in Canada have been without the legal protections available to all other Canadians. Our government has introduced Bill S-2 to correct this inequality and to provide greater protection for aboriginal women. I must advise, however, that agreement has not been reached under the provisions of Standing Order 78(1) or 78(2) concerning the proceedings at second reading of Bill S-2, an act respecting family homes situated on first nation reserves and matrimonial interests or rights in or to structures and lands situated on those reserves.

Under the provisions of Standing Order 78(3), I give notice that a minister of the Crown will propose at the next sitting a motion to allot a specific number of days or hours for the consideration and disposal of proceedings at that stage.

* * *

•(1655)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wish to designate Friday, April 19 as an allotted day.

* * *

POINTS OF ORDER

ORAL QUESTIONS

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to provide a brief response to the point of order raised on the issue of tabling of documents earlier today by the member for Malpeque.

After reviewing the blues of today's question, I want to respond to that. This was a request that certain documents be tabled.

At page 433 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*, it actually discusses the obligations of ministers of the Crown with regard to tabling certain documents. To be clear, O'Brien and Bosc, in referencing these instances, are referring to when documents are quoted by ministers in the House.

The blues, however, show that the hon. Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages did not quote from documents but in fact referred to the existence of letters from eight New Democrats who have asked to have temporary foreign workers approved for work within their constituencies. He did not, however, quote any of those letters.

The obligation to table documents does relate to when one is quoted from in the House or read from in the House. It is not an obligation to table a fact that a document exists or if a member or minister has made reference to the existence of a document that does not give rise to an obligation to table it.

I trust that this will satisfactorily address that question.

Business of Supply

The Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. government House leader for the presentation of the argument. It will be taken into account, and if necessary, a decision will be made by the Chair subsequently.

* * *

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—TEMPORARY FOREIGN WORKER PROGRAM

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is with pleasure that I rise today to speak to the opposition day motion.

First, the temporary foreign worker program was established by a Liberal government, and that government achieved a careful balance of three equally important objectives: protecting the jobs and wages of Canadian workers and protecting Canadians' access to employment opportunities; assisting small businesses and companies having legitimate difficulties finding workers; and protecting the dignity of temporary foreign workers by ensuring that they are paid a fair wage and are treated as fairly as Canadian workers doing the same jobs.

The Conservatives, we believe, have reduced, or perhaps even destroyed, balance in this program. They have skewed the system in favour of the employer alone, have removed important protections for Canadian workers, and, in some cases, may have exposed foreign workers to unfair practices.

I want to speak to some of the positive aspects of the temporary foreign worker program when it is carried out and executed properly.

John Eisses is the president of the Nova Scotia Fruit Growers Association, a very important organization to horticulture in Nova Scotia. He is very concerned about the potential negative effect the proposed changes to the EI Act and associated regulations could have or will have on the Canadian seasonal agricultural workforce.

For decades, it has been demonstrated that very few EI recipients, or Canadians in general, are...capable of meeting seasonal agricultural workforce requirements.

He goes further. He says:

...the temporary foreign worker program...currently provides the industry with a consistent, reliable and trainable workforce that positively impacts the ongoing economic viability of the sector and its supporting value chain. If foreign workers are displaced...farms will go out of business or become less competitive, putting employed Canadians out of work.

This is a key point. As we study the temporary foreign worker program, it is important to understand that for some industries, in some cases, it is working quite well. We want to have the study to understand where the failings are and address those.

Business of Supply

In ridings like mine, where the temporary foreign worker program is actively used by the horticulture industry, as an example, it creates a lot of value-added jobs further up the value chain. For instance, when temporary foreign workers are engaged in picking apples or berries, Canadians are involved in processing those foods, driving the trucks to get the fruits to market, and making pies. There are all kinds of opportunities. In the grape industry, as an example, people pick the grapes, and people make the wine, so there is an opportunity. It is very important to recognize that some of these value-added jobs further up the food chain actually require temporary foreign workers to create that opportunity.

He goes further. He says:

Contrary to public opinion, seasonal agricultural foreign workers support a viable horticultural farm community. Foreign workers are paid minimum wage or more; their employers provide housing that meets code, partial funding for international transportation, local transportation, workers' compensation and additional health care insurance in some cases. Foreign workers pay income tax.

In fact, they also contribute to CPP and EI, but they are ineligible to collect either. They contribute to the local economy as well.

He also tells us that farming:

requires trained managers, use of current technology and equipment, skilled and unskilled workers; this means that a dedicated, reliable and trainable workforce is required which is not available using sporadic EI recipients.

The message is truthful. First, be very careful in the changes being made to EI. It is a warning to the government that some of the changes could be deleterious to the important horticulture industry, but also that when run properly, when there is a balanced temporary foreign worker program, there are industries that depend on it, and it can operate well.

I also have in a recent article in the *Chronicle Herald* the St. Mary's River Smokehouses saying that if their access to the temporary foreign worker program is reduced, it would be very detrimental to this small business.

● (1700)

We also heard from Lee Cohen, a Halifax immigration lawyer, who said that the temporary foreign worker program is a good idea if it achieves two objectives, as follows:

One is that it helps fill labour shortages...with skilled and sometimes not so skilled workers from abroad. This meets a market need and it helps employers in Canada get production done and get work done that wouldn't otherwise be done in the absence of having domestic workers.

He also stated:

it gives foreign workers an opportunity to experience Canada and that group of foreign workers could, if they wish, form a body of people that will...eventually become permanent residents and help build the (country) and add to the Canadian economy.

He does say that he wants to see the program rules fixed to ensure that these are the objectives being met. He says that the program has "lots of shortfalls" and that there is a need for clarity on what is allowed. That is what greater study in the House can help facilitate.

Immigration strategy can be incredibly important to economic growth and opportunity. I live in and represent a riding in Atlantic Canada. In Atlantic Canada, there is a declining and aging population. The demographic trend is very bad. It is a demographic time bomb. Rural communities in Atlantic Canada face even more

challenges in terms of an aging and declining population. I want to propose to the House and to members an example of an idea related to immigration and economic growth and opportunity that combines federal and provincial government leadership. It is actually focused on drawing people to rural Nova Scotia. It is focused on a very specific industry, and that is the grape and wine industry.

In 1997, when I was first elected, there were two wineries in Nova Scotia. Today there are over 15, and more are on the way. To put this in perspective, in 1995 there were 19 wineries in the Niagara region of Ontario, and today there are over 130. The Canadian government could work with the Nova Scotia government to turbocharge the Nova Scotia grape and wine industry and create jobs throughout rural Nova Scotia.

My colleague from Sydney—Victoria is here today. His family came to Nova Scotia as part of the most successful wave of immigration to rural Nova Scotia in our history. That was the wave of immigration from Holland post World War II and in the 1950s. I believe that his family came to Cape Breton in 1952, in fact. At that time, families like the van Oostrums and van Dykes came to Nova Scotia and found opportunity.

There was a deliberate strategy. The provincial department of agriculture in Nova Scotia advertised, along with the federal department of immigration, in Dutch newspapers saying come to Nova Scotia, and we will help identify farmland, help finance your acquisition of that farmland through the farm loans board. We will help bring you to Nova Scotia, where you can find opportunities. They had a very targeted, economically focused immigration strategy.

Fast forward to today. There is tremendous growth in the wine industry and tremendous demand for Nova Scotia wines. In fact, I met with Carl Sparkes and Pete Luckett recently, two of the entrepreneurs involved in our wine industry. They told me that they could sell thousands and thousands of cases of Nova Scotia wine. They sell out every year. There is Chinese demand. The global demand for Nova Scotia wines is growing. The quality has developed very positively. There are gold medal winning wines being produced in Nova Scotia. The biggest challenge is grapes. Nova Scotia does not currently grow enough grapes to meet the demand for Nova Scotia wines. Yet there is farmland across the province that is underutilized, prime farmland, which could be incredible for vineyards.

Fast forward from the Dutch example to today's example. The hardest hit European economies, countries such as Portugal, Italy, Spain and even France, are also countries with a disproportionate amount of expertise in the areas of grape production and wine production.

Business of Supply

● (1705)

There are also countries with, in some cases, up to 40% or 50% youth unemployment and a lack of opportunities. There are also countries that, because of their fiscal situations, are increasing taxes significantly and taxing the heck out of people with capital. There are countries where vineyard land is not affordable; it is some of the highest-cost vineyard land. In Nova Scotia we have high-quality land for potential vineyards, but it is also affordable.

Furthermore, there is even a climate change dynamic to this. Some of the traditional wine production regions, including the Champagne region, some experts are saying, will be rendered less ideal for grape and wine production in the future because of climate change, while Nova Scotia will actually become a better place to produce wine.

Therefore, if we consider the success of that Dutch immigration example and then apply a model requiring federal and provincial leadership working together to today's issue and opportunity around the grape and wine industry in Nova Scotia, it would provide us with an example of an idea—and politics ought to be a business of ideas and leadership around ideas and developing ideas and engaging people on them—that could actually work and could transform rural Nova Scotia's economy.

Carl Sparkes recently bought Jost Winery. He placed an ad recently on the Internet for a viticulturist. He had 60 applications. About 50 of them were from Europe. This bears out the point that there is an opportunity to have a very targeted immigration strategy. It would not be just temporary foreign workers, but on a permanent basis, drawing those people to opportunities to invest in, work in and develop businesses in rural Nova Scotia.

We need to map the land resource. We need to identify land that may be available. We need to target those European countries, perhaps even economies like South Africa, where there is a lot of expertise in grapes and wine and where there are some challenges.

We could attract investors from these countries. We could attract workers from these countries. We could matchmake land in Nova Scotia with the investors and the workers to develop that land into what could be a very highly successful value-added industry in rural Nova Scotia: the grapes and wine industry. We could utilize the farm loans board and other vehicles to help finance some of this. We could engage the Nova Scotia Community College and Acadia University and the federal government's research station in Kentville, which is another reason decentralized agricultural research is so essential. We have seen an atrophy of that research in recent years under the current government. We need to actually restore and increase funding for decentralized research. Certainly the research done for wine in the Annapolis Valley might be quite different from that in the Okanagan Valley or the Niagara region, as an example. We should be helping train Nova Scotians increasingly on viticulture and winemaking.

The opportunity here is not only to reverse the demographic decline of our rural communities and attract a new generation of new Canadians who would bring their families to rural Nova Scotia and help build their wineries, their vineyards and their families as citizens and nation builders in our province, but to create jobs and opportunities for other rural Nova Scotians.

In Canada, one of the most innovative immigration programs in the country is in Manitoba, which has been successful for some time. In fact, Manitoba last year attracted 16,000 new Canadians; Nova Scotia attracted around 2,000. Manitoba's focus has been to engage communities, to engage businesses and to target immigration around economic opportunities. This is the kind of approach that I think would commend itself to the pioneers in this policy in Manitoba: a targeted approach.

However, it is very important when we are having debates on this kind of issue that we do not demonize immigration, that we do not demonize people who come to Canada to create opportunities for themselves and that we recognize the importance of a well-run temporary foreign worker program and an innovative economic strategy around a targeted and long-term immigration strategy, and it is twofold.

● (1710)

While we are very concerned about the flaws that exist within the temporary foreign worker program, it is really important in the course of these debates that we do not choose language that puts out some sort of xenophobic tone that stigmatizes people who come to our country to work, either on a temporary basis or on a permanent basis as immigrants.

I was speaking recently to John Bragg, who is one of Nova Scotia's greatest entrepreneurs, about this issue. He expressed the importance of temporary foreign workers in the horticulture industries that he has been a pioneer in, but he also reminded me of the time in the 1950s when the Dutch were coming over to rural Nova Scotia. He said he remembered people in our rural communities, up in places like Collingwood where John lived, saying, "Why do we need those Dutch coming in? They are going to take our jobs."

That is what people used to say. The reality is those hard-working Dutch immigrants not only built futures for their families but also built jobs for all Nova Scotians who lived in those communities in what was the most successful wave of immigration to rural Nova Scotia.

It is important to realize that the first question we have to ask ourselves is, "Do we want them?" Sometimes there are concerns in the public about this. People feel it is a zero sum thing, that someone coming in is going to take a job from a Canadian worker. In most cases, that is not the case. In fact, these workers create jobs for Canadians higher up the value chain.

About a year ago I read an online survey in *The Chronicle Herald* in Nova Scotia. It asked online readers the question, "Would you support programs to attract more new Canadians to rural Nova Scotia?" Some 65% said "no", and the commentary was along that line. Nova Scotians were afraid they would take jobs from us.

Business of Supply

The best kind of politics is changing people's minds. One of the things we have a responsibility for at all levels of government is to make sure Canadians understand that immigration does not take Canadian jobs; rather, it creates Canadian jobs and opportunities. Canada has been built by people who chose to come here, and we need more workers choosing to come here. We need leadership from the federal government, working with the provinces, for targeted immigration strategies to attract a new generation of nation builders in this fabulous multicultural masterpiece we call Canada.

• (1715)

[*Translation*]

The Deputy Speaker: It being 5:15 p.m., it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

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

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

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

Some hon. members: Yea.

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

Some hon. members: Nay.

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

And five or more members having risen:

The Deputy Speaker: Call in the members.

• (1800)

[*English*]

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

(*Division No. 655*)

YEAS

Members

Allen (Welland)	Andrews
Angus	Ashton
Atamanenko	Aubin
Ayala	Bélangier
Bellavance	Bennett
Benskin	Bevington
Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Boivin	Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi	Brison
Brosseau	Byrne
Caron	Cash
Charlton	Chicoine
Choquette	Christopherson
Coderre	Côté
Cotler	Crowder
Cullen	Cuzner
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)	Davies (Vancouver East)
Day	Dewar
Dion	Dionne Labelle
Donnelly	Dubé
Duncan (Etobicoke North)	Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona)
Dusseault	Easter
Eyking	Footé

Fortin	Freeman
Fry	Garneau
Garrison	Genest
Genest-Jourdain	Giguère
Godin	Goodale
Gravelle	Groguié
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)	Harris (St. John's East)
Hassainia	Hsu
Hughes	Hyer
Jacob	Julian
Karygiannis	Kellway
Lamoureux	Lapointe
Larose	Latendresse
Laverdière	LeBlanc (Beauséjour)
LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard)	Liu
Mai	Marston
Martin	Masse
May	McCallum
McGuinity	McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood)
Michaud	Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue)
Morin (Chicoutimi—Le Fjord)	Morin (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine)
Morin (Laurentides—Labelle)	Mourani
Mulcair	Murray
Nantel	Nash
Nicholls	Nunez-Melo
Pacetti	Papillon
Patry	Péclet
Perreault	Pilon
Plamondon	Quach
Rae	Rafferty
Rankin	Ravignat
Raynault	Regan
Rousseau	Saganash
Sandhu	Scarpaleggia
Scott	Sellah
Sgro	Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Wind-
sor)	
Sims (Newton—North Delta)	Sitsabaiesan
St-Denis	Stewart
Sullivan	Thibeault
Tremblay	Trudeau
Turmel	Valériote— 128

NAYS

Members

Ablonczy	Adler
Aglukkaq	Albas
Albrecht	Alexander
Allen (Tobique—Mactaquac)	Allison
Ambler	Ambrose
Anders	Anderson
Armstrong	Aspin
Bateman	Benoit
Bergen	Bernier
Bezan	Blaney
Block	Boughen
Braid	Breitkreuz
Brown (Newmarket—Aurora)	Brown (Barrie)
Bruinooge	Butt
Calandra	Calkins
Cannan	Carmichael
Carrie	Chisu
Chong	Clarke
Crockett	Daniel
Davidson	Dechert
Del Mastro	Devolin
Dreeshen	Duncan (Vancouver Island North)
Dykstra	Fantino
Finley (Haldimand—Norfolk)	Fletcher
Galipeau	Gallant
Gill	Glover
Goguen	Goodyear
Gosal	Gourde
Grewal	Harris (Cariboo—Prince George)
Hawn	Hayes
Hiebert	Hoback
James	Jean
Kamp (Pitt Meadows—Maple Ridge—Mission)	Keddy (South Shore—St. Margaret's)
Kenny (Calgary Southeast)	Kent
Kerr	Komarnicki
Kramp (Prince Edward—Hastings)	Lake
Lauson	Lebel

Business of Supply

Leef	Leitch
Lemieux	Leung
Lobb	Lukiwski
Lunney	MacKay (Central Nova)
MacKenzie	Mayes
McColeman	McLeod
Menegakis	Menzies
Merrifield	Miller
Moore (Port Moody—Westwood—Port Coquitlam)	
Moore (Fundy Royal)	
Nicholson	Norlock
Obhrai	O'Connor
Oliver	O'Neill Gordon
Opitz	Payne
Poillievre	Preston
Raitt	Rajotte
Rathgeber	Reid
Rempel	Richards
Rickford	Ritz
Saxton	Schellenberger
Seeback	Shea
Shipley	Shory
Smith	Sopuck
Sorenson	Stanton
Storseth	Strahl
Sweet	Tilson
Toet	Toews
Trost	Trottier
Truppe	Tweed
Uppal	Valcourt
Van Kesteren	Van Loan
Vellacott	Wallace
Warawa	Warkentin
Watson	Weston (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country)
Weston (Saint John)	Wilks
Williamson	Woodworth
Yelich	Young (Oakville)
Young (Vancouver South)	Zimmer— 148

PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion defeated.

[*Translation*]

OPPOSITION MOTION—BUDGET 2013

The House resumed from April 15 consideration of the motion.

The Deputy Speaker: The House will now proceed to the taking of the deferred recorded division on the opposition motion concerning the business of supply.

• (1805)

[*English*]

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

(*Division No. 656*)

YEAS

Members

Allen (Welland)	Andrews
Angus	Ashton
Atamanenko	Aubin
Ayala	Bélangier
Bellavance	Bennett
Benskin	Bevington
Blanchette	Blanchette-Lamothe
Boivin	Boutin-Sweet
Brahmi	Brisson
Brosseau	Byrne
Caron	Cash
Charlton	Chicoine
Choquette	Christopherson
Coderre	Côté
Cotler	Crowder

Cullen
Davies (Vancouver Kingsway)
Day
Dion
Donnelly
Duncan (Etobicoke North)
Dusseault
Eyking
Fortin
Fry
Garrison
Genest-Jourdain
Godin
Gravelle
Harris (Scarborough Southwest)
Hassainia
Hughes
Jacob
Karygiannis
Lamoureux
Larose
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PAIRED

Nil

The Deputy Speaker: I declare the motion lost.

It being 6:10 p.m., the House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

● (1810)

[*Translation*]
**PERSONAL INFORMATION PROTECTION AND
ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS ACT**

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. member for Terrebonne—Blainville is not present in the House to propose the order according to the notice published in today's notice paper.

Accordingly, the bill will be 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 deemed to have been moved.

[*English*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, our Arctic is considered to be one of the Earth's last pristine ecosystems. It is not, unfortunately.

Potent greenhouse gases, mercury and toxic chemicals are found there, and we can find the impacts of climate change prominently on display. In fact, last year an area of Arctic sea ice greater in size than the United States melted.

Moreover, 9 of the 10 warmest years in modern meteorological record have occurred since the year 2000. The extent and thickness of summer sea ice in the Arctic has shown a dramatic decline over the past 30 years, with the 6 lowest extents having all occurred in the last 6 years, and may be unprecedented in the last 1,450 years.

While scientists are enormously concerned that these changes represent a fundamental change, and very little is known about the consequences of drastic sea ice reductions, the Minister of the Environment was perturbed mainly about how navigation patterns might be affected. There seemed to be little appreciation that the loss of sea ice had the potential to further accelerate warming and to change climate patterns. In fact, during an exchange in question period, the minister proudly shot back that the government was 50% of the way to achieving its 2020 Copenhagen greenhouse gas reduction target.

The latter is a remarkable claim given the actual emission data, as well as the fact that as recently as the fall of 2011 the government was on track to reach only 25% of its very weak greenhouse gas reduction target. The government did not in fact manage to improve its performance by an astonishing 100% in just over six months, but rather used a higher start value, a projected value, rather than actual emissions, changed the accounting rules, took credit for the action taken by the provinces and territories, and removed any climate accountability measures.

Canadians living in the north face challenges in the coming years: biodiversity loss, climate change, environmental protection, ozone depletion, and the challenge of ensuring responsible and safe shipping. Neither the region nor the rest of us are prepared to manage these challenges effectively.

My question in question period for the Minister of Health, as she takes the helm of the Arctic Council, was simple, "will she allow the continued gutting of environmental protection, or finally stand up for responsible environmental stewardship?"

Unsurprisingly, the Minister of Health failed to respond, and instead the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment stood up and completely dodged my question, a tact on climate change, and used the woefully overused Conservative phrase "we're getting the job done". The question is on what, the destruction of 50 years of environmental protection?

Adjournment Proceedings

I ask again, what will the Conservative government do as head of the Arctic Council? Will it be a leader in the protection of Canada's north, or will it continue to gut environmental legislation and develop Canada's resources at all costs?

• (1815)

Ms. Michelle Rempel (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for the opportunity to respond to my colleague's questions.

"We did not get it done". This phrase was uttered with regard to climate change policy. Was it uttered by someone on the government side? No, it sure was not. It was uttered by one of the litany of previously failed Liberal leaders who we on the government side have seen come to power. Why did they not get the job done? Why did the Liberal government, a party that is purported to be a defender of Canada's environment, not get the job done?

First, it signed on to an international protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which my colleague, who just spoke in the House, has proudly called a symbol of social action, a symbol of something that only included less than 30% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions when the Liberal government signed on to it. Less than 30%. That is not good policy.

Since that time, our government has stated that Canada only produces 2% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions. Given that, we understand that climate change is a very important issue, and not just to our country. It is a global problem. Acknowledging that, how do we act as a world leader to ensure that there are real reductions in greenhouse gas emissions? An agreement that sees less than 30% of the world's emissions included in it is not going to achieve the results we need.

Therefore, we did two things. First, we acknowledged that and participated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in trying to get an international agreement with binding targets from all major emitters. That was step number one. This was when we agreed to the Copenhagen targets that my colleague mentioned and, yes, our government is on track to meet those targets, as evidenced by our emissions trends report, which I am going to speak to in a bit.

The second thing we said was we need to take real action at home. We need to have policy that sees reductions in each sector where major emissions come from. Therefore, we looked at the vehicle sector and implemented regulations there, but we did it in a way that would actually save Canadians money. For example, the light duty vehicle emission and heavy duty vehicle emission regulations were put in place in a way that Canadians would actually see fuel savings over the time of implementation while seeing a huge reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Contrast this to the Liberals' approach. I have already talked about their failed international policy for greenhouse gas emissions. The second part is that they proposed a carbon tax. I have to say I do not subscribe to the belief that a carbon tax is the way to reduce greenhouse gases in a meaningful way. Why? Because it is not cognizant of the fact that this costs Canadian consumers significantly.

I am going to close with our action on Arctic climate change adaptation. It was this government that invested heavily in direct climate change adaptation and mitigation measures for the Arctic. We also invested heavily in the science behind ensuring that climate change is both mitigated and adapted to, not just here but abroad. We can look at the funding that has come through the tri-council agencies, which we have increased, and excellent research is happening in Canada, but we also have to look at the fast start climate change program in which we have invested over \$1.2 billion to see real action internationally.

It has been under our government that we have seen a real stoppage in the growth of greenhouse gas emissions while the economy continued to grow. Under the Liberal government, there was a 30% increase in greenhouse gas emissions. This is the truth. We are working hard to achieve this and we are very proud of it.

Ms. Kirsty Duncan: Mr. Speaker, yet again the parliamentary secretary dodged the question.

Recent rankings of environmental performance clearly demonstrate the Conservatives' dismal record on protecting Canada's environment. The 2008 Climate Change Performance Index ranked Canada 56th out of 57 countries in terms of tackling emissions. In 2009 and again in 2013, The Conference Board of Canada ranked Canada 15th out of 17 wealthy industrialized nations on environmental performance. In 2010, Simon Fraser University and the David Suzuki Foundation ranked Canada 24th in 25 OECD nations on environmental performance. Moreover, the Environmental Performance Index ranked Canada 96th and 102nd out of 132 countries in terms of ecosystem and climate change respectively.

Perhaps I will get an answer from the parliamentary secretary. Will the government continue to gut the environment?

• (1820)

Ms. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Speaker, a 30% rise in greenhouse gas emissions is my colleague's party's track record on managing climate change in our country. Those are the facts. She is dodging that fact every time she rises in the House. She has never acknowledged it.

I am so proud to stand and say that it has been under our government that we have seen a reduction in the growth of greenhouse gas emissions, while our economy continues to grow. The fact of where Canada stands internationally is that we are a leader in the growth of jobs and a leader in the growth of economic prosperity, but we are doing that while protecting the environment.

My colleague always speaks about the United Nations. Our greenhouse gas emissions reports use a methodology that is consistent with one used by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. What does that show? It shows that stoppage in the growth of greenhouse gas emissions and it shows the growth of our economy.

It is this balance that we need to be focused on with regard to climate change policy, and we will certainly continue down that path.

Adjournment Proceedings

[Translation]

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier-Sainte-Marie, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am here today to speak about Bill C-398, which would have reformed Canada's access to medicines regime in order to provide lower-cost medicines to thousands of people around the world with life-threatening illnesses and diseases such as HIV, malaria and tuberculosis.

I spent 18 months consulting all the concerned parties. I spoke with brand name drug manufacturers who were against the previous bill, but were in favour of this new bill being referred to committee. I met with a generic drug maker who has already used Canada's access to medicines regime. He explained to me why the current regime was not working. I also met with representatives of a large network of civil society organizations that supported the bill.

My colleague opposite did not make as much of an effort.

[English]

In fact, it was only in the days before the vote that he spoke to the brand name pharmaceuticals and he did so only after the same pharmaceuticals had written to us to say that they were ready to see Bill C-398 go to committee. Why? Because the people on the other side of the House did not really care about the bill. They had decided from the start that they were going to oppose it for partisan reasons. If it meant doing away with the truth, they did not care.

Let me give just a few examples.

The Conservatives argued that the bill would weaken the safeguards, ensuring that medicines would not be diverted. This is simply false. All the safeguards adopted by Parliament when it first created CAMR unanimously in 2004 remain. None of them were changed.

They said that it would remove measures to ensure the quality of medicines being supplied. That is false again. There was absolutely no change to the requirement for Health Canada to review all drugs exported.

The Conservatives argued it would violate Canada's obligation under the World Trade Organization's treaty on intellectual property rights. Again, that is not true. Experts have testified that Bill C-398 would be fully compliant with WTO rules.

Then the Conservatives said that it could jeopardize negotiations for a free trade agreement with Europe. Oops, the E.U. has similar regulations.

[Translation]

In fact, all these so-called arguments are just excuses for the Conservatives to oppose the bill. That is why they came up with something else every time their arguments were refuted.

When they ran out of solid arguments, the Conservatives started talking about what the government has done to combat HIV/AIDS in Africa. I suspect that my colleague opposite will do the same in a few moments.

It is good to combat AIDS in Africa, but why could we not also adopt a measure at no cost to the taxpayer that would get the most

out of the money allocated to humanitarian aid, save lives and even create jobs in Canada?

[English]

A few days before the vote, we actually had enough support for the bill to go to committee, including from Conservative MPs, but the government decided it would not let this happen. It put partisanship before a life-saving measure. It circulated lies about the bill. It pressured its MPs not to vote for what they believed was right and it ended up disappointing thousands of Canadians. Now the government can wear it.

• (1825)

Hon. Mike Lake (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry, CPC): Mr. Speaker, had the hon. member been at the committee process when it studied a bill almost identical to this one, the independent public servants who testified before that committee refuted just about everything that the hon. member just said.

I am happy to respond to the comments made earlier by the hon. member for Laurier—Sainte-Marie regarding Bill C-398, An Act to amend the Patent Act (drugs for international humanitarian purposes).

[Translation]

The government is an active international partner and a world leader in the fight against HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. The Government of Canada has made significant contributions to global mechanisms that have become the main instruments for low- and middle-income countries to procure medicine at lower costs.

[English]

I would like to remind everyone of one significant example. Canada is a top per capita contributor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, contributing \$540 million for 2011 to 2013. The Global Fund is an international financing mechanism that seeks to disburse funding for programs that reduce the impact of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria in low- and middle-income countries.

The fund has become one of the most significant mechanisms in the fight against these diseases, supporting 4.2 million people with HIV/AIDS, treating 9.7 million people with tuberculosis, and distributing 310 million nets to prevent the spread of malaria. Other major contributions include \$149.6 million to the Global Drug Facility of the Stop TB Partnership; \$450 million to the Africa Health Systems Initiative; and \$2.85 billion for maternal, newborn and child health, providing leadership through the Muskoka Initiative.

This government stands by our commitment to increasing access to medicines in the developing world. Our approach has yielded results like the ones I have mentioned. In contrast, the bill would have put us offside our international trade obligations and would not have resulted in greater exports to the developing world.

Adjournment Proceedings

Canada is not a low-cost producer of generic drugs and cannot be expected to compete against low-cost emerging markets. It is estimated that India, for instance, supplies 80% of donor-funded antiretrovirals to developing countries. Furthermore, according to the World Health Organization list, over 98% of essential medicines are generic or are not patented in developing countries.

Bill C-398 would have eroded patent protection, reducing Canada's attractiveness for investment in innovative science that develops new medicines without increasing the supply of Canadian drugs to those in need.

That is why our government will continue to lead global initiatives to get much needed medicines to those in need and we will continue to do so using the most effective means necessary to actually save lives.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Mr. Speaker, it would take me 10 minutes to reply to all of that.

[*English*]

First, my colleague said that civil servants have testified against this bill at committee while the bill never went to committee. I am wondering if he even took time to read the bill, which I doubt.

Then he said that it is outside our trade obligations. The experts who have participated in WTO negotiations to set up the framework that would permit that said that the bill was completely consistent with WTO obligations.

Then we are told that it would infringe on patent protection and basically that it would affect brand name pharmaceuticals. The brand name pharmaceuticals wrote to the leaders of all the main parties in December to say that they had no objection to seeing the bill go to committee.

Really, the Conservatives are so isolated and they are trying to find arguments that just do not hold water.

● (1830)

Hon. Mike Lake: Mr. Speaker, the experts that I am talking about are the independent public servants who have testified time and again and have said that the bill does do the things that the hon. member says it does not do.

Bill C-398 would not have increased the export of Canadian-made generic drugs to the developing world. The bill ignored the fact that countries are accessing generic medicines from other low-cost producers like Brazil or India. The bill, if implemented, would have been inconsistent with Canada's international obligations and would have weakened Canada's intellectual property regime. That is what the independent experts said.

Our government will continue to focus on what works, and what has been proven to work is the government's comprehensive approach to helping those in the developing world. This includes maintaining Canada's access to medicines regime and providing financial support to global public health initiatives. We will continue to be a leading contributor to funds like the global fund, the Africa health systems initiative and the global drug facility.

These initiatives, and others like them, have achieved significant results. Globally more than eight million people living with HIV in low- and middle-income countries were receiving HIV antiretroviral therapy at the end of 2011. This represents a 25-fold increase from 2002. Progress has also been made for other diseases. Four times as many people are receiving treatments for TB than were in 2000.

We will not stop there. We will continue to lead by example in the global community to increase the availability of treatment to the world's most vulnerable.

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Mrs. Carol Hughes (Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is obvious that the Conservatives are so disconnected they actually believe their false talking points.

I am glad to have this opportunity to revisit the issue of chronic underfunding of women's shelters available to aboriginal women, especially those living in more remote first nations communities. This is a critical shortfall that must be addressed so that headway can be made on the grim reality of violence against women.

Any other measures the government will undertake will be incomplete if these shelters are not available to allow a woman to remove herself from a violent environment and begin the process of restoration and healing. If we do not provide long-term adequate funding to aboriginal women's shelters, we are turning our backs on some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Shelters provide front-line health services to first nations, Inuit and Métis people. Their mandates and responsibilities range from emergency services to transition homes. With that in mind, we must consider the lack of women's shelters on reserves as a public health crisis.

Aboriginal women are not protected by the same legislation that non-aboriginal women enjoy. Matrimonial real property on reserves differs from off reserves. A 1986 Supreme Court ruling states that when the conjugal relationship breaks down, courts cannot apply provincial and territorial law to deal with real property, such as the family home. That job is the responsibility of the federal government.

While there have been motions to modernize this legislation and protect aboriginal women when their marriage dissolves, both the Native Women's Association of Canada and ministerial representatives agree that increasing shelter funding should happen before creating a matrimonial real property regime. However, these shelters remain chronically underfunded, and any funding they do receive is pieced together from a series of limited-term options.

Adjournment Proceedings

In 2012, on-reserve aboriginal women's shelters received the majority of their funding through the family violence prevention plan, which totalled \$12 million for one year. According to the 2013 budget, that program has been extended for two years, with funding totalling \$24 million. Given the projections for inflation over the next two years, this actually amounts to a cut to the program. With inflation expected to run at about 2%, the funding should have been increased by \$480,000 to maintain the real value of the funding for the program.

Despite the outcry of major stakeholders to increase the funding and make a long-term commitment to aboriginal women, this year's budget offered no help and seems to be acceptance of the de facto cuts due to inflation.

As it cuts funding for aboriginal health facilities, let me remind the government that aboriginal people are the fastest-growing segment of our population. This is an ongoing trend, and that population is expected to grow at more than twice the rate of the general population over the next four years.

Of the aboriginal women living in remote areas, 70% do not have access to shelters. Despite rising populations, essential services are receiving less and less funding, limiting their effectiveness and limiting access to services for this target population. Shelters like the Mississauga Women's Shelter in my riding do their best to meet the needs of their population, but with the government starving them of resources, how can we reasonably expect them to accomplish their ever-growing list of tasks, especially since there is more need now than ever for the work that these shelters do?

Given that we know that violence against aboriginal women is a public health crisis for which women's shelters are a key front-line service and that the budgets for shelters are frozen, which amounts to a cut once inflation and population growth are factored in, will the government reconsider its position and commit to increasing core funding for women's shelters on reserve?

• (1835)

Mr. Greg Rickford (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, for the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity to speak to the question from the hon. member for Algoma—Manitoulin—Kapusksing.

Our government is committed to ensure that women, children and families on reserve have access to the services they need to protect their safety and security.

The Government of Canada is taking action to address all forms of violence, particularly the high number of aboriginal women and children who are affected by violence.

We take violence against aboriginal women very seriously. Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada supports access to a network of shelters serving on-reserve residents and also works in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, first nation people and other stakeholders to develop effective and appropriate solutions to the issues of domestic violence.

To support family violence prevention programs and services on reserve, economic action plan 2013 is investing in the ongoing operation of the family violence prevention program on reserve.

Our government has committed, in economic action plan 2013, \$24 million over two years for the family violence prevention program. These funds would allow the total funding level of the program to remain at \$30.4 million for each of the next two years.

Family violence is an issue that can affect Canadians from all walks of life and can have tremendous costs, particularly for children, so it is important to ensure that help is nearby. Families in first nations communities that are remote and isolated may face particular challenges in accessing protective and supportive services. The family violence protection program funds shelter services and violence prevention programming on reserve. This investment contributes to enhanced safety and security of on-reserve residents, particularly women and children.

We will continue to support the vulnerable. Shelters for women, children and families living on reserve are important for their safety and well-being in family violence crisis situations.

Currently, the shelters funded by the Government of Canada to serve women and children on reserve are spread across all provinces, including five new shelters in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. These shelters cover 330 first nation communities.

The need for emergency shelters and services for women and children is an unfortunate reality. We continue to work with our partners to ensure an adequate level of support to the shelters and the workers providing these services. We will continue to support these programs and services because they make a real and tangible difference at a critical time for those who need them.

What exactly is at the heart of addressing violence? Without a doubt, it is prevention. Prevention programs and services in first nation communities must be responsive to the specific needs of first nation members.

Family violence prevention projects supported by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada are proposal-driven and may include promotion and public awareness, education campaigns, conferences, workshops, counselling and community needs assessments.

We will continue to support and develop effective, appropriate solutions in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, first nation people and their leadership and other important stakeholders. Our government, along with its partners, is concerned about all forms of violence and its impacts.

• (1840)

Mrs. Carol Hughes: Mr. Speaker, the goal here is to protect the victims, and obviously the actions of the government are not addressing that.

As of 2010, the largest portions of on-reserve shelters were emergency shelters. The number one reason women require these shelters is for spousal abuse. Aboriginal women are twice as likely to report spousal abuse as non-aboriginal women.

In 2009, about 15% of aboriginal women with a partner reported they had experienced spousal violence. Comparatively, the number is 6% for non-aboriginal women.

Instead of access to adequate, culturally sensitive healing opportunities, these women are met with barriers like overcrowding and limited access, and obviously these facilities have limited funds.

Clearly, we need a long-term commitment to women's shelters, so that women in abusive relationships can take control of their situations without fearing things like housing insecurity.

For aboriginal women living on reserve, this is all the more pressing, as shelters are often their only option to escape abusive relationships and receive the care they need.

Adjournment Proceedings

With that in mind, I repeat my call for the government to commit to increasing core funding for on-reserve women's shelters.

Mr. Greg Rickford: Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to address the problem of violence against women and girls. To support family violence prevention programs and services on reserve, economic action plan 2013 is investing in the ongoing operation of the family violence prevention program on reserve.

Economic action plan 2013 commits \$24 million over two years for the family violence prevention program, and these funds would allow the total annual funding level of the program to remain at \$30.4 million for each of the next two years.

Investments contribute to enhanced safety and security of on-reserve residents, particularly—and importantly—women and children. We will continue to work with our partners to meet the needs of aboriginal women, their families and their communities.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted.

Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 2 p.m., pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:42 p.m.)

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