



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

House of Commons Debates

VOLUME 147 • NUMBER 038 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

OFFICIAL REPORT
(HANSARD)

Thursday, January 30, 2014

—

Speaker: The Honourable Andrew Scheer

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thursday, January 30, 2014

The House met at 10 a.m.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

• (1005)

[*English*]

PUBLIC SECTOR INTEGRITY COMMISSIONER

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

[*Translation*]

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

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[*English*]

ENERGY SAFETY AND SECURITY ACT

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-22, An Act respecting Canada's offshore oil and gas operations, enacting the Nuclear Liability and Compensation Act, repealing the Nuclear Liability Act and making consequential amendments to other Acts.

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

* * *

CANADIAN FORCES SUPERANNUATION ACT

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP) moved for leave to introduce Bill C-572, An Act to amend the Canadian Forces Superannuation Act and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Superannuation Act (deduction of disability pensions).

He said: Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague from Thunder Bay for seconding the bill.

For members of the RCMP and the military, when they are permanently disabled and medically released from the RCMP or the military, they can apply for Canada pension disability in the event that they can no longer work again. The problem is that, if they receive Canada pension disability, then that is deducted dollar for dollar from any superannuation benefits they receive. Therefore,

they ask the question: “Why are we applying for Canada pension disability when we are getting it deducted here?”

We think that is unfair and unconscionable. This bill would correct that deficiency to ensure that the heroes of our country receive all the monies they require in order to get on with their dignified lives.

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

* * *

PETITIONS

PRIVACY

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I have four more petitions regarding the United States' Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act.

The petitioners ask the government to ensure that the privacy of Canadians, especially their financial privacy, and their rights are respected in any discussions with the United States on how the United States would like to enforce the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act. They ask that Canadian laws be obeyed and that the rights of all Canadians be respected.

[*Translation*]

PASSPORT CANADA

Mr. Claude Patry (Jonquière—Alma, BQ): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to present a petition signed by over 12,000 residents of Jonquière—Alma who want the Passport Canada office in Place Saint-Michel in Jonquière to remain open. I present this petition in the House this morning.

[*English*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

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

The first petition is from residents primarily in the Vancouver area who call upon the government to establish a permanent ban on crude oil tankers on the west coast of British Columbia.

Coincidentally, I was just meeting with halibut fishers who were talking to me about the treacherous waters of the Hecate Strait and how it would certainly be impractical to imagine supertankers safely traversing those waters.

Business of Supply

LYME DISEASE

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, the second petition is from residents in my own riding of Saanich—Gulf Islands in support of my private member's bill, Bill C-442, which is coming up for a vote soon.

The bill is for a national Lyme disease strategy. I am certainly hoping that this can be treated as a non-partisan, compassionate and urgent matter for people across Canada suffering from Lyme disease.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, today I table a petition signed by many of my constituents who indicate that they do not believe the government has justified the need to increase the number of members of Parliament from 308 to 338.

The petitioners suggest there are greater needs in terms of what could be done with the money, such as protecting seniors' pensions and increasing bedside nurses and community policing. There are many other priorities they would rather have seen.

EXPERIMENTAL LAKES AREA

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, today I have the pleasure of presenting a petition from residents of Thunder Bay and across Ontario who are concerned about the far-reaching consequences of the government's failure to negotiate a timely transfer for the Experimental Lakes Area in northwestern Ontario, also known as the ELA.

The petitioners note the importance of this world-renowned freshwater research centre and how much it contributes to science in Canada. They feel it is in jeopardy, as the area is not currently staffed, and without proper staffing and financial resources, the important environmental and ecological resources of the ELA could be lost.

* * *

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 Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

●(1010)

[Translation]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CANADIAN FORCES

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP) moved:

That, in the opinion of the House, the men and women who bravely serve Canada in the armed forces should be able to count on the government for support in their time of need, and that the government should demonstrate this support by (a) immediately

addressing the mental health crisis facing Canadian soldiers and veterans by hiring appropriate mental health professionals; (b) reversing its decision to close veterans' offices; and (c) prioritizing and concluding the over 50 outstanding boards of inquiry on military suicides so that grieving families may have answers and closure.

He said: Mr. Speaker, I have the tremendous honour and great pleasure of rising in the House to move an important motion that will allow us to address some serious issues that many veterans across Canada will face as a result of the closure of Veterans Affairs offices. I am also honoured to be sharing my time with the hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore. In fact, I would like commend him for all of the hard work he does on the issues facing our veterans. He has been doing this work passionately for many years now, and I must commend him for it.

Getting back to the motion, tomorrow will be the last day of operation for several Veterans Affairs Canada offices. The affected offices are located in Corner Brook, Newfoundland; Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; Thunder Bay and Windsor, Ontario; Brandon, Manitoba; Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; and Kelowna, British Columbia. These seven offices will close tomorrow—in addition to the Prince George office, which has already closed—if the government does not reverse its decision.

These looming closures, which are happening because the Conservatives do not comprehend the importance of the services offered by the Veterans Affairs Canada offices, will affect nearly 20,000 veterans. They will no longer have access to in-person services with a case manager who is familiar with the services offered by Service Canada and who can help them take advantage of the services they are entitled to. For example, they can have their compensation claims filled out. These services are important to veterans, yet they are having to deal with a government that does not understand that at all. The government does not respect them. Closing these offices will force veterans to travel more than 100 kilometres to meet with a case manager. That means five or six hours of driving in many cases.

For these veterans, having access to in-person services is crucial because they do not necessarily know about all the compensation options and services they are entitled to. Government propaganda is seeking to appease the veterans because they are truly frustrated. They are being told that Service Canada will open 662 offices and will offer them services, but that is not the case. In fact, these offices will only give them access to a computer—when the vast majority of them already have one at home—and a telephone number to call for information.

Contrary to what the government is saying, Service Canada will not offer any services to veterans. That will be tragic for the some 18,000 veterans affected by the closure of these offices. It needs to be said.

This motion is designed to tell the government that our veterans and soldiers have many issues and have lost faith in their government. This week, a group of veterans was welcomed—that word is a bit strong considering they were snubbed—by the Minister of Veterans Affairs. He offered to meet with them but then did not even have the decency to show up. He arrived very late and lashed out at a veteran who did not agree with him about the importance of Veterans Affairs Canada offices. The minister's attitude towards those veterans is indicative of the government's insensitivity towards them.

The hon. member for Sackville—Eastern Shore has received thousands of emails from veterans and soldiers who are fed up with the way the government is treating them. I am sure he can elaborate on that.

•(1015)

There is no question people are angry about the way the government is treating veterans. We ask soldiers to fight for their country, and now they have to fight their own government to access the services and compensation they are entitled to.

Over the past few years, soldiers and veterans have launched several class action suits. There will be more in the future because the government is ignoring their needs.

Closing these offices is a big deal. There will no longer be access to case managers who understand the inner workings of Veterans Affairs Canada. The department is complicated and extremely hard to understand online. The government is telling veterans that they will no longer have access to a person who can tell them what they are entitled to and help them fill out the forms required to obtain those services. That access is being taken away, and they feel discouraged. Many of them will not get what they are entitled to. The whole thing is absolutely scandalous. The way this government is treating our veterans, the country's heroes, is completely unacceptable.

As I said, the attitude exhibited by the Minister of Veterans Affairs this week is yet another example of how the government is abandoning our veterans. It is eliminating many services.

I will have more to say about the psychological services provided to veterans and the shortcomings in that area.

The government is making cuts to services that our soldiers and veterans are entitled to. I pointed the finger at the Minister of Veterans Affairs, but ultimately, I think the Prime Minister's Office and the Treasury Board are the ones responsible. All they have been saying over the past few years is “cut, cut, cut”. They are like headless chickens, or maybe heartless ones, heartless when it comes to veterans. That is how the government treats our veterans. The government is taking away services and compensation they are entitled to. They are being forced to go to court to get what they have a right to. That is absolutely scandalous, and veterans no longer trust the government or the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

The government is closing points of service. Veterans need to meet their case managers face to face for guidance, help and psychological support. Quite often veterans are injured and have a hard time getting the services they are entitled to. During a face-to-face meeting, the case manager might help the veteran fill out forms.

Business of Supply

This is extremely important. Nearly 20,000 veterans are being denied that service.

Not only does government propaganda suggest that the government is providing 500 points of service, but the Conservatives are saying that they have invested an additional \$5 billion since coming to power. That is not true. It is more like \$3.5 billion, or thereabouts, that was paid in benefits. Most of that money was additional benefits paid out to the very large number of soldiers returning from Afghanistan. It also includes the roughly \$800 million settlement paid out in the class action suit filed by Mr. Manuge on behalf of veterans, a suit that the government lost. Not a lot of extra services are being provided.

Over the past few years, the Canadian Forces ombudsman has repeatedly pointed to the lack of mental health personnel to treat our soldiers and veterans. In 2003, the government announced that roughly 400 people would be assigned to that. For a few years now, we have been short at least 60 people to provide our veterans with mental health care. We have seen the crisis this has caused in the past few months. Our soldiers need psychological support, and this government is simply not doing enough.

Since my time is running out, let me offer some help to my colleagues affected by the closure. I encourage them to support this important motion and to tell the autocrats at the Prime Minister's Office and the Treasury Board that they are on the wrong track when it comes to our veterans. They are heading in the wrong direction.

•(1020)

I invite the members affected by these closures to tell the government that it is on the wrong track and ask it to reverse its decision. This is important for the thousands of veterans across the country.

[*English*]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the leader of the Liberal Party was very clear yesterday in regard to the behaviour of the Minister of Veterans Affairs. Yesterday in question period he asked that the Minister of Veterans Affairs be released, calling upon the Prime Minister to fire the minister.

We do not take this lightly. Given what has taken place, I understand that the leader of the New Democratic Party is asking for the same thing. I would ask the member to provide comment in regard to that. Is it fair to say that the apology is not good enough, that our veterans deserve more than what has been offered by the government?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his remarks and for that important question.

To get back to what happened, on the way out of a meeting with the minister, dozens of veterans expressed their disagreement and distress with regard to the office closures. Some of these veterans were in tears because the Minister of Veterans Affairs simply did not show them any respect.

Business of Supply

What is more, he also did not respect the new veterans charter, signed by the current Prime Minister. Under one of the first sections of this charter, all veterans have the right to be treated with respect and dignity. Clearly, that begins with their minister, the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

In my opinion, the minister failed in his obligation to respect veterans. He read us some semblance of an apology, which I did not believe because I do not feel he showed any compassion at all. If he wants to apologize, he should reverse his decision to close these offices and do something about the problems our soldiers are experiencing. If he focuses on doing that, then we will accept his apology.

[*English*]

Mr. David Sweet (Ancaster—Dundas—Flamborough—Westdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, even prior to coming to this House, had a stellar record of public service. I know from working with him that the Minister of Veterans Affairs has been dedicated to making sure that the initiatives we have already taken to enhance veterans benefits continue to be enhanced.

The member across needs to be reminded it was this government that made sure that for catastrophic injury there is a lump sum payment of over \$275,000 given to members of the military. He needs to be reminded that there is also a lump sum payment from the Department of National Defence. He needs to be reminded that the character of what used to happen in the military, where a soldier could not serve without all of their physical faculties, has changed. The Canadian Forces do everything they can to keep every forces member employed. The list goes on and on.

I ask the member, if there are new initiatives in the next budget, and I do not know, will New Democrats change their ways and finally vote for some of these initiatives that we add to veterans benefits?

• (1025)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his observations and comments.

The fact remains that soldiers, and veterans in particular, are angry with the government because they often do not receive the benefits they are entitled to.

My colleague is saying that the minister has a stellar record of public service, but the fact of the matter is that there are quite a number of issues affecting veterans that need to be resolved. I am wondering whether he will support the bill that my colleague from Sackville—Eastern Shore just introduced. That would be a good way to say thank you and to highlight the important contribution of our veterans. It would also be a good way to show them that we respect them and that we are grateful for the work they have done.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, before I start I want to answer the question from the Conservative MP. If he honestly believes that a new budgetary framework will come in for Veterans Affairs, then it should be introduced in a government bill like it was with Bill C-55, which we fully supported. In lumping this into an overall budget with

thousands of other spending items and cuts and everything else, we would have to express confidence in the government. I can assure members it will be a long day before we in the NDP ever express confidence in the government.

Today we heard him talk about a very important motion brought in by my colleague. It is an honour, and at the same time there is a bit of sadness, that we bring this to the floor of the House of Commons. Veterans should not have to fight and struggle to get the benefits they so rightly deserve. They have already fought for this country. It is their country, regardless of political affiliation, regardless of government or opposition, that owes them the ultimate and unlimited responsibility, because they have the unlimited liability. The military, the RCMP, and their families deserve no less.

Let us go over a bit of the track record of the current government. The reality is that it took a five-year lawsuit to settle the SISIP clawback, the insurance payment clawback that was being deducted from disabled veterans. It took a ruling from Judge Barnes. It forced the government into an \$888 million lawsuit. If the Conservatives had listened to us many years ago, it would have been settled; there would have been less angst among the members of the veterans community, and it would have saved the government and the taxpayer a lot of money. However, they did not.

Now what happens? They are now taking RCMP disabled veterans to court on the exact same type of issue. There are over 1,200 people in a class action lawsuit against the government right now. They have been asked by the RCMP and their families, by the Royal Canadian Legion, and by us repeatedly, to stop the court proceedings, work with the legal team and the RCMP veterans and give them the respect, dignity and payment they so rightly deserve. Their answer is that they are going to go to the courts.

There is another lawsuit going on, with Equitas, against the government, over certain aspects of the new veterans charter. What did the crown attorneys presenting the case for the government say in that lawsuit? These are smart lawyers. They get their directions directly from the government. They indicated that there is no fiduciary or social moral responsibility for the veterans community; that only applies to the aboriginal community. I am paraphrasing.

The members of the veterans community were outraged when they heard this. I have asked the minister and the government on six separate occasions whether they do or do not have a moral, legal, social and fiduciary responsibility to care for those they put in harm's way. What do we get? Absolute silence.

We should not have been too surprised when we saw what happened the other day. I know the minister, deep down, probably regrets what happened. I am sure that he does. However, the reality is that it happened. This type of conduct has happened with veterans across the country for sixteen and a half years, through ten different ministers and from two different parties. What I witnessed the other day was the lowest of the low. That is why we had no choice. They brought in the so-called Veterans Bill of Rights, which we knew was toothless because there is no punishment. If they break a certain element of the Veterans Bill of Rights, they just say they are sorry and they move on. However, every single day of the year our veterans, RCMP, and their families, deserve the utmost respect, dignity and courtesy.

Business of Supply

It is our job, whether in government or in opposition, to listen to their concerns. We may not like what they are telling us. We may not like the manner in which they are telling us. However, we get paid very well, and ministers get paid even better, to listen to those concerns. It is our responsibility. We could not sit here if it were not for the sacrifice of the men and women who put on the uniform, and their families, and that of the RCMP who serve us in Canada.

• (1030)

Veterans have unlimited liability. That means they are willing to risk their lives so that you and I can be here, Mr. Speaker. We, again, have the ultimate responsibility for their needs and that of their families, all the way to and including their headstones.

A while back the government presented a budget and said it was going to spend millions more dollars on the Last Post Fund. However, it did not change the litmus test of who could qualify for that fund. Service members who make \$12,000 or less may qualify for proper burials, but those who make over that limit do not qualify. Even though the government put more money into it, two-thirds of the applicants are still denied and the Conservatives refuse to correct that.

On the issue of the closure of offices, I want to tell the people of Canada and the Conservatives right now that when they are kicked out of office in the next election, we in the NDP will reopen those offices and make them better, so they provide better services to the men and women who serve our country.

There is something else the government is doing, and many people are unaware of this. When the last Korean overseas veteran passes away, all of the contract service beds across this country will be finished, aside from rare exceptions. Right now the Perley, Camp Hill, the Belcher and other hospitals across the country that service veterans are subsidized by the federal government. When the last Korean veteran dies, the modern-day veterans from 1954 onward will no longer have access to those beds paid for by the federal government.

The federal government is downloading this responsibility onto the backs of the provinces. The previous Minister of Veterans Affairs said that health care was a provincial responsibility. I remind the government that the care and treatment of veterans, RCMP members and their families is a federal responsibility, and to download that to the provinces is unacceptable. In Nova Scotia alone, a \$41 million download will happen in the near future. It is unacceptable when we see floors of hospitals being closed for veterans and being transferred over to provincial uses.

The men and women who serve our country deserve no less. They deserve to have the best treatment. As Rick Mercer once said, when we take them from heaven on earth, which is Canada, and send them over to hell on earth, we should give them a gold card and make sure we give them platinum service when they come back.

There are many veterans I deal with who are getting very good service from the Department of Veterans Affairs. That is true, and I compliment the workers of the department who are providing that service. However, the problem is that many others are not getting that service. There are approximately 700,000 men and women who retired from the military who have dependant spouses and the DVA

has a client base of just over 200,000, so more than two-thirds of that base is not being serviced now. Many of them do not require the services, but they may one day, and many more veterans are coming online.

I want to highlight two of my constituents, Kim and Blair Davis. They have given me permission to do this. The minister's office knows this file very well, because a few months ago I held an open press conference with the Davises. He had a serious brain injury from a LAV rollover accident and explosion that killed a few of his buddies. He has had major operations and is suffering severely from psychological problems, including PTSD and others. He has not asked for the government to give him a Rolex watch or a trip to Florida, but for basic rehabilitation services. He has asked for things like VIP service to help him, his wife and his family.

Several months went by and I got an email from him yesterday saying, "I am at my wit's end with this government. I simply do not know where to turn. Please, please help me and my family". When a press conference is held, the government says it is going to look after the family and do all sorts of things, and two and a half months later I get an email saying it has not done anything yet. This is indicative of a government that simply is not listening.

In my final words, I will implore the Minister of Veterans Affairs and the Minister of National Defence to please stop the cuts to these departments and hire the mental health workers that are required. The government can pump money in, but if there is a bureaucracy delaying the hiring of these mental health workers, it is simply not working. I implore these two fine men to please get off their chairs and do something in a rational, speedy manner so that the men and women who serve our country in the RCMP and the military and their families will get the respect and dignity they so rightfully deserve.

• (1035)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if my colleague can share his personal view on how the veterans who were up on the Hill 36 or 48 hours ago were treated by the minister. Could he put into words what he feels about what he heard from the veterans on how they were treated?

For a long time, the veterans have been saying that they want the minister to look them in the eye and say, "We're closing your centres". For a long time, we have pushed the minister to do that.

The veterans went down to his office at 4:00 or 4:30. They were totally dismissed. Just when they were about to have a press conference, the minister blew in, looked them in the eye and basically dismissed them. He told them to go to wherever.

I am wondering if my colleague could share his thoughts and views on that.

Business of Supply

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, to put it frankly and as politely as I can in parliamentary language, I believe it was not the minister's finest day.

Having said that, I did speak to a 29-year-old Afghanistan veteran and a 92-year-old World War II veteran, from different ends of the spectrum. The 92-year-old said that when veterans call the DVA they need to bring their lunch because it will be take that long before they get through to it. The 29-year-old said he is very Internet savvy and is finding it difficult to access services and forms through that system called My VAC Account.

What they both said, along with the others, is that they knew in their hearts that they might not be able to get the decision reversed, but they wanted the chance to meet with the minister face to face to say that they are very upset, that they do not like what the government is doing, and that they want to be heard.

Only the minister can explain why he was not at that meeting at 5:00. Only the minister can explain his actions in that regard.

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, the office in Thunder Bay will be closed on Friday, and 10 jobs will be lost. Thunder Bay has already experienced drastic cuts to Service Canada. With the huge overload of people who have been cut off EI, my staff is doing the work of Service Canada.

Veterans from World War II, the Korean War, Bosnia and Afghanistan, many of whom have post traumatic stress disorder, will not have any services unless they drive a full day to North Bay or Winnipeg, go on the Internet, albeit many do not have a computer, or get stuck on a 1-800 number for hours or more.

Are the hon. member's veterans and his local office suffering similar problems, and what are we to do about this disastrous turn of events?

• (1040)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, the government is telling everyone that it is closing these offices and providing better services through Service Canada, which is simply not true.

Yesterday I spoke to a veteran who went to a Service Canada office the other day. He said to the young man who was working there, "I understand that as a veteran I have to come here to get help". The response was, "Well, I have a bit of training, but I can give you a 1-800 number, if you'd like".

That is the government's improved services. Then it will say, "Don't worry, we'll come to your house". That is not true. Veterans have to be case managed or severely injured before someone will come to their home. Who determines what a severe injury is? The reality is this. Before they get case managed, it could take two to five business days before someone will get back to them, and it is an "if" as to whether or not someone may show up at their home. Not every veteran will get that service. That is what I find completely unacceptable.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his passionate speech and his expert knowledge on veterans' issues.

At that end of his speech, he spoke a bit about the crisis affecting the Department of National Defence and the severe lack of psychological support it offers to soldiers and veterans. In the most recent budgets, we saw major hiring slowdowns for mental health professionals. What is more, since 2010, no mental health professionals have been hired at all. I would like to hear what my colleague has to say about that and about what we could do to provide better assistance to our soldiers.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, the quick answer is to listen to the reports of the ombudsmen of the military and the DVA. Both ombudsmen's reports are very clear: the government must do more to improve the mental health of these individuals.

The reality is that we know there is a string of mental health professionals waiting to be hired. The government says the money is there, yet they have not been hired yet.

How can that be? What bureaucratic chink is stopping these people from being hired? Only the Minister of National Defence can answer that question.

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the Minister of National Defence.

Mr. Speaker, it is indeed an honour to join in this important debate. I am particularly proud to do so as part of a government that has demonstrated in meaningful ways its genuine support for and pride in the men and women who have served both in the military and the RCMP and who continue to serve this great country.

Our continued commitment remains. We will ensure that veterans and their families have the support they need, where and when they need it.

The shift in where we are placing our resources reflects the very real and changing demographics within our veterans community and where veterans choose to live. We are ensuring that Veterans Affairs' employees are located where they are needed the most, where they can provide the fastest and most effective service to the greatest number of veterans and their families. No government has done more on this front. As of February, we will have increased the number of points of service for veterans sixteenfold since 2006. Veterans now have access to service and information at our government's nearly 600 Service Canada offices. For the first time in our history, Veterans Affairs Canada has a presence in every region of this country, from coast to coast to coast.

In the eight communities where we are transferring an area office, we will continue to provide additional support to local veterans by posting one of our specially trained employees in the nearest Service Canada location, and in some cases within the same building or the same area.

Business of Supply

In 2009, for example, we first started working with the Department of National Defence to open 24 integrated personnel support centres and another seven satellite offices on Canadian Armed Forces' bases and wings across the country. The result is that more than a hundred of our front-line employees are now working alongside their counterparts at National Defence to provide one-stop care and support to veterans and still-serving members. Thanks to our cutting red tape for veterans' initiatives, we are just a click away with our full suite of new e-services that are available online 24/7.

Let me also directly address the claims that our government is not committed to veterans. Nothing could be further from the truth. Since 2006, we have added \$4.7 billion in new funding for programs and services directly related to veterans and their families. While the number of veterans in Canada declines, our government has only increased the budget for veterans' services to a record number and it is a record that Canada can be proud of.

Nevertheless, one group in particular has questioned our loyalty to veterans. I am speaking of the Public Service Alliance of Canada. It has tried to paint itself as the champion of veterans. Let me be absolutely clear: it is anything but. This union has opposed Bill C-11, the priority hiring for injured veterans act. This would give the veterans injured on duty while serving Canada the first crack at federal job opportunities. I cannot think of anyone who deserves these opportunities more, yet the public sector unions stand in opposition to it.

Canada's veterans of both the Armed Forces and the RCMP have stood up for us through thick and thin, while the public service unions only support veterans when it suits their political objectives and their agenda. Shame on them.

However, there is another extremely important issue we must discuss today, the issue of mental health among Canada's veterans.

Above everything else, I want to echo the Prime Minister's expressions of sympathy and those of every member of our government by offering my own sincere condolences to the families of military personnel who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Nothing we can say or do here today will undo the tragedy they have and will continue to endure, but we cannot let them down. We must let them know that we mourn with them, that we are committed to taking action.

Indeed, I want to assure all Canadians that under the leadership of our Prime Minister and the Minister of National Defence, we are all exploring further enhancements in this very complex area of the human dynamic.

● (1045)

These are very complex issues, and there are no easy solutions. Our military and my department at Veterans Affairs Canada have never had more comprehensive mental health programs than what we currently have. That begins with the full care and support required to treat operational stress injuries, such as post traumatic stress disorder. In fact, through our partnership with the Department of National Defence, we are operating and funding a total of 17 such clinics across the country. We have established tele-mental health services at these clinics to reach veterans living in remote or rural areas of our country.

As well, Veterans Affairs has access to a national network of more than 4,800 community mental health professionals so that veterans can get the help they need, wherever they need it and when they need it. This includes approximately 375 community clinical care managers who are available to provide intensive care management services to those with complex mental health issues.

In addition, we have a 24-hour toll-free crisis and referral centre and world-class peer support programs so that veterans and their families can seek help from others who know first-hand what it is like to cope with severe service-related injuries.

As these different programs and services illustrate, help is indeed available, but as a number of authorities have noted in recent weeks, the first step is to ask for help. We have to overcome the stigma that is still too often associated with mental illness. We have to do everything we can to encourage men and women in crisis to seek the care they need. We have to reach out in every way we can to those who are suffering in silence. We have to demonstrate to veterans and still-serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces that true courage is admitting the need for help.

Recognizing the sacrifice of Canada's veterans is an important part of this entire process of providing help and support. This year we will commemorate the many milestone anniversaries approaching from the World War I and World War II eras. We will encourage Canadians across the country to recognize and honour Canada's veterans, not just for their service but for their sacrifice.

Most of all, I want to reassure all veterans that they will continue to receive the specialized care and support they require regardless of where they live. I want to repeat that: regardless of where they live, veterans and their families can continue to rely on home visits from registered nurses and their Veterans Affairs Canada case managers for those who require them.

We will continue to be there for them to cut their grass, to shovel their snow, and of course to help them with their housekeeping needs, as well as to provide health care and financial benefits as they need them.

Through our comprehensive review of the new veterans charter, we also intend to take into account and implement improvements to our continued commitment to support our veterans, especially those most in need.

We are not going anywhere. We have always been there for Canada's veterans and their families, and we always will be. I am not leaving.

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●(1050)

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister said two things that I would like to challenge.

He said that those who have a problem should come forward. That is exactly what he should be saying, so that when men and women who serve their country have a severe problem, they can come forward.

The problem is that when they are serving in the military, the minute they do come forward, the clock starts ticking on their removal from the military. We have had over 200 people last year and again this year who are being removed from the military before their tenth year, which means they will lose out on hundreds of thousands of dollars of future benefits. If these men and women are not deployable, they are not employable.

The minister said that veterans will still continue to get the services they require when they need them. Kim and Blair Davis of Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia, are not getting that service. To the minister, they would like to say they have received an email, and want the minister call them and then provide the service they have been asking for.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Speaker, I do want to sincerely thank the member who has, over many years, been not only attentive to this file but has also demonstrated a very caring, conscientious regard for the service, contribution, and sacrifices made by our veterans.

I will gladly take that information and personally deal with it.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have heard the minister say repeatedly we are going to shovel their snow, cut their grass, and clean their windows. I am sure the minister is aware that it takes more than just cutting their grass, cleaning their snow, and cleaning their windows for veterans suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder.

If a veteran suffering post traumatic stress disorder goes to one of the 600 centres that the minister is elaborating on and tooting about, the veteran will find they are Service Canada centres that already exist and that veterans have to stand in line for an hour and two to come before a clerk who says they cannot help them, but hands them a form and tells them to dial a 1-800 number.

I am wondering if the minister truly believes in what he says. Maybe the minister should tender his resignation and become a veteran, and then we can cut his grass, clean his snow, and clean his windows. Maybe he should do that, and do it now.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Speaker, I can certainly give the member assurances that we will do everything in our power to look after veterans. There is a very concerted effort to upscale the training and so forth at Service Canada offices, and in the areas where the eight offices, or nine offices now, are being closed, there will be dedicated Veterans Affairs Canada personnel at those offices.

I cannot imagine how negative that statement is. In the context of the member's comments referring to veterans and their inability or lack of due diligence in managing their financial affairs, it is so disparaging of people who are trying to help veterans and who are helping veterans. The member referred to his view of that when said

it is like hanging a case of beer in front of a drunk, who would go and spend it either on trying to buy a house or a fast car or on booze and addiction.

It is quite hypocritical for people to be speaking out of both sides of their mouths, and the member seems to be doing that.

●(1055)

Mr. Parm Gill (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, let me start by thanking the hon. minister for his very passionate speech and his dedication and commitment toward helping Canada's veterans every single day.

I have the opportunity to work alongside him and I can assure everyone that the minister puts his heart in every single day in terms of looking at ways to better the benefits and services we provide to Canada's veterans.

One of the things the minister mentioned in his speech was the initiative brought forward by him and by our government in the fall, which is priority hiring for injured veterans. I am wondering if the hon. minister could highlight some of the benefits of that initiative that our injured veterans will benefit from.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. member for his question. I am pleased to provide some clarity.

We have endeavoured to take into account the tremendous assets of the training, leadership skills, organizational skills, and background that our retiring military people bring to another career. We see a great movement in the private sector to embrace the skill sets and the value of military personnel by hiring them into their organizations.

We see the same benefit within the public service. That has been the drive and the intent, and we intend to make that a success. We have had all kinds of encouragement from veterans and stakeholders internal to the government, and of course we also are partners with the private sector in this regard.

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to join my colleague to take part in the debate today on what is a critical issue: the welfare of Canada's brave men and women in uniform who serve our country and who have served our country.

First I would like to again extend my deepest and most heartfelt condolences to all those who have been affected by recent tragedies. My thoughts and prayers are with those individuals' families and friends and with the entire Canadian military family. The government, and indeed all Canadians, appreciates and recognizes the important service that the members of the Canadian Armed Forces provide to all of us. We also recognize the responsibility to care for their physical and mental health and we are committed to providing them with the care they need and deserve.

I think it is important to take a few minutes today to highlight the incredible work of the members of the Canadian Armed Forces and the vital service that they provide our country. Being a member of the Canadian Armed Forces is more than a job; it is a way of life. Every single day, our men and women in uniform willingly put service before self to serve our country, having made the commitment to protect the security of Canada and of Canadians.

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They can be deployed at a moment's notice to serve on operations either at home or abroad, leaving their families and friends and the comforts of home behind. They can be called to serve in hostile environments and austere conditions, sometimes risking their safety and lives to protect others.

At home they safeguard our land, skies, and oceans. They stand on guard to help Canadians in need of life-saving help. Last year alone, Canadian Armed Forces assets were deployed to more than 1,000 search and rescue incidents, providing critical capabilities and expertise.

They also stand on guard to support civil authorities in times of natural disasters, as they did in June of last year when southern Alberta suffered crippling floods. At their peak, 2,300 regular and reserve force personnel were deployed in support of Operation Lentus, as the mission was named. They assisted with the evacuation of civilians. They removed debris to ease the flow of water. They assisted in remediation efforts. They sandbagged areas and buildings. They repaired critical infrastructure. They also assisted provincial and local authorities in the assessment and monitoring of the floods.

The Canadian Armed Forces also assist in preventing disasters. Every year they contribute to Parks Canada Agency's avalanche control program in Rogers Pass, British Columbia, along the Trans-Canada Highway and the Canadian Pacific Railway, helping to prevent potential loss of life through unexpected avalanches.

Our men and women in uniform also do exceptional work overseas. For example, since 2006, through Operation Caribbe, the Canadian Armed Forces have been supporting the multinational-led campaign against illicit trafficking by international organized crime in the western hemisphere. Trafficking of drugs, weapons, money, and people is a major source of revenue for transnational organized crime groups and poses a threat to international, regional, and Canadian security.

Half a world away, our military has also been detecting and disrupting terrorist activity in the Arabian Sea region since 2004 through Operation Artemis.

Further afield, after more than 12 years of involvement in Afghanistan, Canadian Armed Forces operations in that country will end on March 31, 2014. More than 40,000 Canadian military members have served in Afghanistan, some of them deploying more than once. Our activities have included combat, security, development, support, and training operations in varying capacities in regions in Afghanistan. Over the past decade, the Canadian mission has seen great leaps, great heroism, yet great tragedy. We will never forget the Canadians who gave their lives so that the people of Afghanistan may have a more peaceful and prosperous future.

The Canadian Armed Forces also stand ready to provide, on behalf of the Government of Canada, aid to other countries devastated by natural disasters. Last fall the Disaster Assistance Response Team, DART, was employed to provide humanitarian support to the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan.

• (1100)

At its peak, DART included more than 300 members, with a range of tasks, such as clearing debris to reopen vital transportation links,

re-establishing power supplies, purifying water, and providing medical care to over 6,500 patients. DART made a difference in the lives of so many citizens of the Philippines dealing with this tragedy.

We can be proud of our Canadian Forces members that they give so much to the citizens of this country and others around the globe, but their service unfortunately comes with sacrifice and risks, risks to their physical health and to their mental health. While we do everything we can to mitigate these risks, injuries, either physical or mental, do happen. When they do, our men and women in uniform deserve to receive the best possible health care. The Government of Canada is committed to providing it to them. In fact, our government has done more than any other before it when it comes to the care of our ill and injured men and women in uniform.

As I pointed out yesterday in the House, we have increased our annual health care expenditures by over \$100 million, for a total of over \$420 million per year. We have created the Joint Personnel Support Units to allow our ill and injured members to work with medical personnel, social workers, occupational therapists, and others in order to help them return to work.

The Canadian Armed Forces has a solid mental health program, one that was recognized as a model by the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Mental Health Commission of Canada. We provide mental health care through 29 clinics across Canada, from Esquimalt to Halifax, and support is provided throughout the entire career and deployment cycle of a Canadian Armed Forces member.

The Canadian Armed Forces mental health strategy, released in 2013, was praised by some of Canada's top mental health authorities, including the Mental Health Commission of Canada, the Canadian Psychiatric Association, the Mood Disorders Society of Canada, and the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Group.

The mental health care program is supported by over 400 full-time mental health professionals working for the Canadian Armed Forces, and the government expects there to be even more as we continue to hire.

The Government of Canada, the Department of National Defence, and the Canadian Armed Forces take mental health care very seriously. The forces continue to work with their allies and partners in civilian health care to determine the best treatment, awareness, and prevention approaches for our military men and women and to combat the stigma and barriers around mental health care.

As I stated in December, we must continue to do all we can as a team to support our personnel, to encourage people in crisis to access our health care system, and to reinforce and promote the mental health care system we have in the Canadian Armed Forces.

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This is an important message for all Canadians in all walks of life. All of us, including everyone in this room, have a role to play in eliminating the stigma around mental health issues and in encouraging those in need to seek help. Our men and women in uniform can rest assured that this government will continue to make the well-being of our men and women in uniform a priority and will ensure that those who have served and fought for our freedom receive the care they require and deserve.

• (1105)

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. minister and the previous minister for their kind words of sympathy for the families who have suffered tragic losses as a result of suicide. I want to thank them as well for recognizing what our men and women in uniform do on a regular basis, not just at home but around the world.

I would make one recommendation to the defence minister, which he could do right now, that would change the lives of hundreds of military personnel who serve under his watch. The minute they come forward and admit they have a mental or physical problem, the clock starts ticking on their removal from the military. Many men and women in the service will not come forward, knowing full well that it means the loss of their jobs in the military. A recommendation is to either eliminate the 10-year rule for benefits, or allow the men and women who come forward to stay in the military until they have another proper full-time job, or allow them to get all the proper services and benefits and pensionable amounts they could have for the rest of their natural lives. If the minister did that, he would improve the lives of many who serve under his watch.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, we make every effort to support these individuals, to support their continuation in the Canadian Armed Forces, and to support them during their transition outside of the armed forces when that time comes and when that time is appropriate.

Our job is to work with these individuals to make sure that they get the care and the treatment they deserve and need at any given time during their careers. Again, it does not stop while they are in the Canadian Armed Forces, as my colleague, the Minister of Veterans Affairs, has pointed out. This will continue throughout the lives of these individuals. This is important. This country has had a good record with that, this government in particular, and we are going to continue to work with these individuals to give them every possible assistance.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the minister for his words and the expression of the pride Canadians have in the service the men and women in uniform provide to us and to our country.

In his remarks, the minister mentioned, with respect to armed forces members who experience operational stress injuries, that the first step is for them to come forward and ask for help. I think it has been clearly identified that there are barriers. These barriers are real and are in the way of people coming forward, so they struggle with these injuries alone and with their families, sometimes for years, before they come forward.

The Minister of Veterans Affairs put his finger on one of those barriers, and that is the stigma that remains in the armed forces with respect to mental injuries.

There was a study done by the committee in 2009 on PTSD. It made an extensive series of recommendations that touched on actions the government itself could take to reduce and eliminate stigma in National Defence. I would like to ask the minister if he could tell Parliament what he and his ministry have done to address recommendations 15, 16, 17, and 18 in the 2009 report—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. Minister of National Defence.

• (1110)

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, I think the member may have been cut off near the end, but I thank her for the question.

Again, removing the stigma attached to those suffering from mental health is an ongoing process and is one that, quite frankly, I am pleased there is so much more awareness of among the public. We had the Bell call campaign in the last couple of days for people to come forward. It reached out to all of society.

Yes, we have to remove any stigma within the military. Again, the Chief of the Defence Staff and those working with him are actively working to make sure that there is no stigma for someone to come forward in the military, just as there should be no stigma for anybody outside of the military.

These are changes we have to bring about in society. There has been progress, but we want to continue to see progress in this society, in the armed forces, and among our veterans so that they come forward and ask for and get the help they need. We all have a stake in that.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have to provide the correct information to the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore.

When members come forward and ask for help for operational stress injuries, that does not mark day one of the beginning of the end of their careers. Any treatment they receive, be it through the military itself or through operational stress injury social support, OSISS, is kept completely confidential. The chain of command does not have access to their medical records, and the stigma that has to be overcome is a stigma within themselves.

Getting back to the motion of the day, the opposition motion refers to “outstanding boards of inquiry”. I would like the minister to comment on that aspect of the motion and share his views with the House.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Mr. Speaker, with respect to the outstanding boards of inquiry, I have expressed my serious concerns to the chain of command with respect to the delay of these reports. I have asked the Canadian Armed Forces to make their completion a priority. I want to see the result of those, as do all the families who are affected by this.

As a result, I can say that the Chief of the Defence Staff has recently directed a dedicated team to be convened to close outstanding boards of inquiry as quickly as possible. This makes sense. This is for the benefit of everyone concerned.

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I rise to today to speak on behalf of the Liberal caucus, along with other colleagues, on this opposition motion put forward today by the hon. member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant.

There is a crisis emerging in the support for injured soldiers and veterans alike. This is a crisis that has led to a number of tragedies and recent suicides. I want add my words of sympathy and compassion for the families and friends of those members and veterans.

However, like so many crises, this one did not appear overnight. Over a decade of engagement in Afghanistan has created an entire new generation of veterans as well as a generation of current serving members, some of whom are now suffering as a result of their service.

[*Translation*]

The men and women who enlist in the Canadian Forces to serve their country are called on to risk their lives and often go through traumatic events.

The government and the people of Canada are duty-bound to provide our soldiers, sailors and veterans with the best mental and physical health services, as well as access to government services that they can count on. The Conservative government has not been able to fulfill this solemn responsibility.

[*English*]

This is a debate I think we all wish was unnecessary. Unfortunately, the government, time and time again, has put its own economic and political self-interest ahead of the well-being of Canadian Armed Forces members and veterans alike, and sadly, the years of government neglect contribute to the tragic consequences of which we have spoken.

The hopelessness and despair that leads people to consider ending their lives is a hopelessness and despair that is added to when budgets are cut and services are worsened even when a crisis, and some of the steps that need to be taken to address that crisis, is identified.

Far from a complete solution to the complex issues facing our service men and women and our veterans, the motion represents a step forward, and that is why the Liberal Party will be supporting the motion.

The mental health crisis affecting both current Canadian service members and veterans did not arise overnight. Countless independent experts, armed forces medical officials, the National Defence and Veterans Affairs Ombudsmen, and even a parliamentary committee have sounded the alarm bells and offered solutions.

I would suggest that while the Conservatives have had a lot of words about how much they care for our men and women in uniform, but when it comes right down to the actions that have been identified that need to be taken, they have performed poorly. In fact, I would say that there have been eight wasted years. The Conservatives have simply chosen not to listen.

In 2009, the Standing Committee on National Defence issued a report that provided both an assessment of the government's CF

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mental health strategy and 36 concrete recommendations to address the issues and gaps they found. Recommendations included everything from prevention to early identification to addressing stigma to providing support to integrating resources and finding ways to make sure that medical professionals are hired and available. The committee recommended that the assessments continue over the course of years and that the military reservists be included.

Four and a half years later, this report gathers dust on a shelf in the minister's office. Many of the recommendations, I would say most of the recommendations, have not been implemented, and there has not been a single follow-up report from the government.

In 2012, the Canadian Forces Ombudsman recommended that the Canadian Forces evaluate its capacity to respond to the PTSD/OSI challenge and to address the “palpable and growing tension between commander and clinician...relative to OSI medical treatment and administrative support”. Yet the government seems to be caught by surprise, rushing forward to claim that now it will provide solutions while remarkably still ignoring the fundamental issues that created these problems in the first place.

• (1115)

There is not only a lack of resources, there is a lack of care and a lack of intention to make this a priority. More than just ignoring the issue, the Conservative government has actively made it more difficult to provide adequate care to Canadian Armed Forces service members and veterans alike.

The ombudsman made recommendations to enable “...more decisive leadership of the mental health system's capacity to meet the OSI imperative”, yet we found out that in 2010, there was a hiring freeze. Therefore, the efforts made by the Surgeon General and military medical personnel to fill the gaps in medical professional care have been consistently and routinely blocked by that hiring freeze, which the government and the minister responsible chose to do absolutely nothing about.

Of the 12 recommendations made by the ombudsman to improve the treatment of injured reservists, only 4 were judged to have been fully implemented in his follow-up. That is 4 out of 12. That is a failing grade.

Contrary to its claims of unprecedented support—and more than one photo op, I might add—the government has failed to reach even the benchmarks for mental health professionals set in 2003 under a previous Liberal government, to say nothing of the new levels now needed after over a decade of engagement in Afghanistan, including in some of the most dangerous terrain.

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The Canadian Forces ombudsman's report in the fall of 2012 warned the government then that it had never reached the 2003 goal of 447 mental health workers. We knew what was needed to support injured armed forces members. We knew that back in 2003, and the level of support needed has only gone up. However, the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, when questioned at the House of Commons committee on national defence, recently admitted that he is "very concerned about the capacity we have" to treat injured soldiers, given the government's Canadian Armed Forces budget cuts.

In September 2012, a national defence press release boasted about how funds earmarked for additional mental health workers were "identified personally by Minister MacKay". At the time of the press release, 378 mental health professionals were employed. Remember, the goal set in 2003, before the primary operational period in Afghanistan, was 447. We had 378 of those positions filled, and now 18 months later, what has happened? The government has hired a measly 10 more. As of last month, 388 positions were filled. It is far short of what is needed, and the gap is costing lives.

The Conservative government may be earmarking the funds; it claims that it has the funds and that it has added funds, but it is making it impossible for the Department of National Defence to spend them. In their frustration, defence sources have gone to the media to share their frustration and alarm. According to a recent report in the Canadian press:

Even though the positions were identified and money earmarked, every potential hire—both contract and public service—has been subject to an increasing level of scrutiny....

Rather than being able to hire the staff they know they need, they are instead forced to justify every application in writing, put it up several chains in the department's bureaucracy and put it before a committee of assistant deputy ministers at national defence, by which time either most of those applications have been denied or the person being recruited had moved on to another position.

According to the ombudsman, Mr. Daigle, as of today there are currently 76 qualified professionals that could be hired immediately, but they have remained in the candidate pool because of a "cumbersome" and slow-moving hiring process. The government's own hiring freezes blocked the provision of necessary medical support positions. The support is not there. Over half of the military bases in Canada do not have a psychiatrist.

• (1120)

These shortages are not going unnoticed. They are affecting access and quality of care, but they are also affecting morale. When I talk about hopelessness and despair, imagine the plight of a serving forces member injured in Afghanistan who has to wait up to two years to get a medical diagnosis and before that medical diagnosis is made, that person cannot access the support and services that are needed. That is the situation that our men and women are facing.

While the government tells us one story with a lot of nice-sounding words about what it is doing, the service men and women I spoke to in Petawawa certainly told another story. There appears to be a gap between what their experience is and what is said by the government and higher ranks in the armed forces, and that is contributing to the sense of hopelessness and despair.

I will draw the House's attention to recommendation 2 in the standing committee's report that I referred to, which is entitled, "Pour de meilleurs soins: services de santé offerts au personnel des forces canadiennes, en particulier dans le cas des troubles de stress post-traumatique".

[Translation]

Recommendation 2: The Department of National Defence should cause an independent audit to be conducted of military patient case management practices to determine the extent to which a gap exists between expressed Canadian Forces policy and the actual practices applied to the continuing treatment and care of injured Canadian Forces personnel. Once defined, appropriate measures should be taken, throughout the chain of command, to eliminate the gap and improve patient care.

[English]

Four years ago, it was already clear that there was a disconnect between what was being said and what was being experienced. The committee said, address that and take care of it in all levels of the chain of command. What has the government done on that level? It has done nothing.

This was echoed when I met with executives at the Alberta NWT Command Legion. They told me about mentally injured service members waiting months and months for diagnosis, without which they have no access to the operational stress injury clinics that would otherwise be available. I heard how the Legion itself was paying, from its scarce funds, rent for injured service members who were being discharged from the forces, and who were not receiving the retirement benefits due to them in a timely manner and unable to pay their rent. The Legion was providing support to fill the very gaps created by the government because of a lack of intention to correct the situation.

Retired General Rick Hillier, former Chief of the Defence Staff, neatly summed up the issue when he said:

I think that now this is beyond the medical issue. I think that many of our young men and women have lost confidence in our country to support them.

How sad is that statement? How sad are Canadians to know that there is that lack of support for the men and women in uniform who serve us so well? The government is balancing its budget on the backs of veterans and Canadian Armed Forces members. General Hillier is right: this is beyond a medical issue. This is a case of the government abandoning those who have served it.

When the Canadian Armed Forces cannot spend the money it is given, that money flows back into federal coffers as lapsed funds. In 2011 alone, the Department of National Defence gave back \$1.5 billion of unspent funds to the federal treasury. There are announcements of funds, but those funds lapse and are given back. There are announcements of correcting problems, but those problems do not get corrected.

To date, up to \$7 billion of funds have lapsed from the Department of National Defence. What kinds of supports could have been provided with those funds?

Why does the government say it is correcting these problems and filling these gaps and, meanwhile, not spend the funds available, but turn them back into general revenues, and not hire the medical professionals needed? This is not only with regard to mental health care or veterans' offices closing down.

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I would ask how many dollars are being saved by closing down these nine offices that are so critical to injured veterans who depend on that kind of one-on-one care that they have been receiving. How much is being saved? What percentage is that of the \$7 billion that have been allowed to lapse from the National Defence's budget?

● (1125)

Clearly, aside from the commitment to the members of the armed forces and veterans for photo opportunities, there is no commitment by the government to provide these men and women who have served, and do serve, with the resources they need. As well as the lapse in funding, the government is now cutting funding outright, across the Canadian Armed Forces.

In shocking testimony in late 2012, before a Senate committee, Lieutenant-General Peter Devlin, the commander of the army, told the committee that the land forces operating budget had been shrunk by an eye-popping 22%, a figure that does not show up anywhere in publicly available defence documents.

Training has been hit particularly hard. According to Lieutenant-General Devlin, the training budgets for the formation are probably 45% plus lower than they have been. By 2014–15, the army will have only 75% of the budget it had three years prior. Between the strategic review and the deficit reduction action plan, the Canadian Armed Forces is dealing with \$2.7 billion less than planned, and less than promised, because this is a government that made a huge show of its defence strategy. It calls it the Canada first defence strategy. I call it the Conservatives failed defence strategy.

The fundamental underpinning of the strategy was stable and increased funding for 20 years. However, that has simply not happened. By 2010, the budget freezes meant that statutory salary increases were coming out of the department's own budget and forcing them to shrink spending on other things. Since then, there have been billions in budget cuts. This is a Conservative failed defence strategy that impacts the men and women in uniform and our veterans every day.

These cuts have specific consequences. The Veterans Transition Network, founded by Dr. Marvin Westwood and Dr. David Kuhl of UBC in my riding of Vancouver Quadra, has been providing valuable support to returning service members since 1999. To date, the Department of National Defence has yet to fund a single participant. Of the countless veterans who could benefit from this program, Veterans Affairs has funded participation for a mere eight. It then used this program to celebrate the government's branding and to claim credit, but in fact, eight people have been funded; not eight events, not eight workshops, but eight veterans.

In testimony before the National Defence committee, the executive director said:

They're talking about supporting our program in principle, and I'm sure, with budget cuts as they are, that everyone is starting to ask where the money is going to come from.

That is one more example of the government's inability to follow through.

Even the most basic services, such as offices for veterans to interact with and housing for military families who support those who serve, have fallen victim to Conservative cuts.

The Conservatives are cutting 781 employees from Veterans Affairs workforce by 2014–15, some 22%, as well as closing the nine veterans service centres. How is that going to improve services to veterans? Of course it is not. It is going to make things worse. Instead of supporting veterans, the government has decided to nickel-and-dime their pensions. It is more willing to spend scarce resources on lawyers defending the government when veterans have to go to court to get served than it is to spend it on the veterans. It does not take much to figure out where its priorities are: in its own interest and not in the interests of veterans and the men and women in uniform.

I want to conclude with this. The issue of supporting our armed forces members and our veterans is not a Liberal, Conservative, or NDP issue.

● (1130)

It is a human issue. It is a Canadian issue. It is an issue of right and wrong. It is an issue of will, intention, and action, not words. The men and women in uniform stand up for Canada every day. Why is the government not standing up for them?

The government appears willing to spend time, money, and political capital on commemorating battles of yesterday. We want the government to spend that time, money, political capital, and will on supporting our armed forces members and our veterans with the resources they need and deserve today.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in my riding of Parkdale—High Park, we have two branches of the Legion. They are both very active, especially around Remembrance Day. They are active throughout the year and are a home for veterans in our community, both young and old.

My dad served on a minesweeper in the North Atlantic. He signed up at one of those branches, in fact, way back when. Fortunately he came back from the war and lived a long and productive life. He remained active in the Legion and was always immensely proud of the service he had given and indeed the service of all Canadian veterans.

I know that, were he still alive today, he would be absolutely heartbroken that the federal government would sacrifice benefits to veterans, those who have sacrificed so much for this country, especially for a political deadline to balance the books before the next election.

I have no doubt about the sincerity of the member who just spoke. She spoke very eloquently. I do note that both in 1995 and in 2005, the Liberals also cut veterans' services. I ask the member if that is still the approach of the Liberal Party today, or would it maintain funding for veterans' services?

● (1135)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague from Parkdale—High Park for her comments.

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I am a little disappointed that the member used this time to describe a situation dating back 20 years.

[English]

We have ample ways in which the situation today can be improved, and some of those are expressed in this motion. Many are in the reports that I have referred to over the course of my remarks. In fact the key thing that is missing is that this support for our veterans and our injured armed forces members be made a real priority.

It is a priority of the Liberal Party and will be a priority should we form government.

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am somewhat disheartened by all the negativity that the hon. member has spoken about here. It is hardly encouraging those who may be in need of mental health assistance or who may be sufferers to come forward, because the picture painted there is absolutely untrue.

I just want to ask the hon. member if she is aware that there are 38 primary care clinics available, 26 special mental health clinics, 7 world-class operational trauma stress support centres, a network of more than 2,000 civilian health care providers, and on and on.

I am just wondering how informed the member is. At the same time, I note that the Liberal record on voting for enhancements to both the Department of National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada has been absolutely abominable. In fact, I have scores of issues here where the Liberals were not supportive. That is the party that was labelled as the authors of the decade of darkness by the very same retired chief of defence staff, Rick Hillier.

I do not get it. The negativity really should fall on the Liberals, not on the government.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, in my remarks, I was attempting to show, by portraying the budget cuts and the petty fights with the veterans over the benefits they are entitled to, that the government has continually engaged in a climate that is not conducive to a sense of hope that is needed for our armed forces members and our veterans.

In fact, veterans have said that they are experiencing being betrayed by the government. After the minister's unfortunate events of two days ago, veterans are expressing that they are not just being betrayed but being insulted by the government. That is what the minister should be paying attention to, how to correct that fundamental negative attitude that underpins all of the government responses on these issues.

Hon. Mark Eyking (Sydney—Victoria, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I guess the truth hurts, and the minister is carrying a very detailed report that our critic from Quadra has given. The truth is there and I am very ashamed of the Minister of National Defence who has roots in Cape Breton. For him not to talk at the cabinet table with the minister and to keep the offices closed, I think has been a disaster this week, and it shows.

When Conservatives are not taking care of veterans, how is it going to hinder young men and women from getting into the military, seeing how they are not going to be taken care of? Is this

going to have a major impact on people signing up to put on a uniform for this country?

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, my colleague's insight is absolutely correct. When recruits are considering the Canadian armed forces as a career, of course they want to have a sense for how they will be treated. Will they be valued and will their service and sacrifice be honoured within the forces once they complete their operational service and are veterans? It must be very discouraging.

Beyond that, the serving members themselves notice how the veterans are treated. When veterans have to go to court to get pensions, when the compensation for a severed limb is less than if they went to a workers' compensation board, it is demoralizing for the armed forces members. They do an absolutely magnificent job for us, and it is our job to provide the best possible support for them. The government is not doing so.

● (1140)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I can barely believe what I am going to share with all members here today, and it is from a veteran I met with last weekend in my riding. He said the problem is not just post traumatic stress disorder. He is on a medical leave and he said he is being harassed by Veterans Affairs staff, that they call all the time and follow him. One actually said on the phone more than once, "Oh, I've seen people like you. We wouldn't want you to commit suicide now, would we?"

He actually believes officials are encouraging people to commit suicide. I know it is an appalling thing to say, but this is what a veteran said to me. The department needs to be reviewed from the bottom up and top down, to take care of our veterans. These are the words of a veteran. Members can yell at me from across the aisle if they want. A veteran in my riding told me to try to get this story out.

Ms. Joyce Murray: Mr. Speaker, I just want to respond to the member and the leader of the Green Party. I am disturbed to hear her account. I have heard very different accounts. I have heard that the people who serve at Veterans Affairs Canada are caring, capable, and dedicated individuals, and that is the case with the armed forces members themselves.

In Vancouver Quadra we had a veteran who was waiting six months for service and told us personally that the service that is provided and the individuals were caring and dedicated, but the capacity had been so much weakened and cut by the Conservative government that this gentleman in his nineties—who was not able to be mobile without some assistance from Veterans Affairs—was housebound for six months. It is because he simply could not get down the stairs, and the elevator that had already been signed off on was not installed, through lack of funds and lack of capacity in Veterans Affairs Canada.

It is not the individuals. It is the government and the lack of capacity, support, and funding, which it is withholding from Veterans Affairs individuals.

Business of Supply

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I wish to clarify at the outset that I have the pleasure of sharing my time with the member for Saint-Lambert.

Mr. Speaker, it is my honour to rise in support of the motion moved by the member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant. I think it is very important to reiterate what the motion says, because we will be voting on the motion and it is important for Canadians to be watching and seeing the very specific measures that we are simply asking all the members of this House to support, so that, in fact, we can provide the best possible support to our veterans who have served in honour.

That motion simply calls for the House to ensure that the men and women who bravely served Canada in the Armed Forces be able to count on the government for support in their time of need and that the government should demonstrate this support by immediately addressing the mental health crisis facing Canadian soldiers and veterans, by hiring appropriate mental health professions; second, to reverse the decisions to close the veterans offices, which it has decided to close; and third, to prioritize and conclude the over 50 outstanding boards of inquiry on the military suicides, so that grieving families may have answers and closure.

I think these are very reasonable requests. These requests come from those who have served and their families.

I also wish to add my condolences to the families who have recently suffered through these suicides.

On behalf of their families and our veterans, I request all members to support this motion.

We send our armed forces into conflict and dire circumstances. They witness the atrocities of war. Any ordinary person would probably suffer some kind of mental trauma from this. It is important that we, the members of Parliament, be here to stand up for them and ensure that the appropriate medical services are there when they return, whether those are minor concerns or whether they may lead to post traumatic stress disorder or other problems. Many who suffer mental problems also may suffer physical disabilities because of the impact they have on their health and on their families.

We are imploring all the members of this House to carefully consider this motion and its reasonable requests. This is the least we can do for our veterans.

Many of those recently deployed to Afghanistan have served not just one but numerous deployments, and so they have been subjected to considerable stress. I, my constituents, and all Edmontonians recognize and are extremely grateful and proud of their contribution, and in particular, the Edmonton Garrison for their service continuously in the mission to Afghanistan. I had the privilege of participating in the recent memorial to their service: the installation at city hall.

I have had the honour, as well, of attending with the former minister of defence one of the repatriation ceremonies at Petawawa. I can share with members that it is an extremely emotional experience. It brings home, very clearly, the sacrifice made, not just by our soldiers but also by their families who are left behind.

It is absolutely critical that we provide the best possible first-rate health services to our armed forces.

My father served in World War II, in the air force. I never had the chance to speak with my father because, unlike many of his friends, he chose not to discuss the war. I suspect, in his time, in his generation, this was something they kept to themselves, if they were stressed by the experience. I regret now that I did not take that opportunity. However, many of his friends, colleagues who fought, and members of our family circle have often regaled us, as children growing up, with their tales of the war. One of them, particularly, was a hero: a fighter pilot who was shot down and interned. Therefore, I am fully aware of what occurred in those wars. Unfortunately, I did not meet my great uncle who served in World War I, because he gave his life in that war. There has been a lot of contribution by my family.

I grew up being very proud of our armed forces and continue to be honoured that they serve in my city. It is home to 5,000 military personnel and their families, so it is important that I stand up on their behalf and seek the best possible supports for them.

● (1145)

At the start of the Afghan mission, 750 troops from the 3rd Battalion of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry deployed, and they have continued to serve through that mission. As my colleagues have shared, veterans should not have to return home to fight for the health and financial benefits that they should be awarded. It is critical that as members of this House we stand up and hold the government accountable for ensuring those services are provided, and in a timely fashion.

I have been absolutely appalled at the stance of the current government. These are not the only lawsuits; the government seems to have a propensity for wanting to take Canadians to court instead of delivering on the services it should be delivering. There was the extended lawsuit that was dragged out, costing many millions of dollars. The veterans finally won that case and ended the clawback of their disability benefits. As my colleagues have mentioned, the second lawsuit on the fiduciary responsibility of the government to its military is now proceeding. We highly recommend that the government back off on wasting Canadian dollars on fighting our armed forces in courts and instead simply extend them the benefits they deserve.

The recent suicides are indeed a tragedy that could potentially be avoided. We are not saying absolutely that the lack of services is directly the cause, but any additional health services that can be provided will help to avoid a tragedy. Many in this House have previously spoken in this place about the suicides that have been suffered in their own families. They have implored that all of us stand up for more attention to supports in mental health.

Business of Supply

I note that the Library of Parliament just issued a report on the current issues with mental health in Canada. It says that one of the solutions is more funding for mental health promotion and that investment would likely produce long-term savings. That is not just savings in dollars, but savings in lives. Very clearly this is one of those areas where we need to be giving greater attention.

Given the rise in the number of suicides among our veterans, there is an issue. It is not enough simply to say to the veterans that they should be reaching out. My experience with those who are suffering mental distress is that we need to be watching over those people, whether they are in our family or among our neighbours or in the armed forces.

Clearly, we need additional measures. There are a number of measures that have been recommended by the Veterans Ombudsman, by parliamentary committees, and certainly in this House today. I encourage all members to give them due consideration.

First of all, we need to reduce the cuts to the veterans offices. I run into this all the time, whether we are asking for health studies or the impact of industrial activities, any kind of activity that is going on in rural areas. We are often told that the concentration of the population is not enough to justify the expenditure or action. We need to ensure that even if they are small offices in a rural area, it is important that these citizens also have equal access to those services. I look forward to assurances that they are not missing those services simply because they are not near a major centre. We have to remember that a lot of our first nations peoples also served in the armed forces and they very often live in rural areas, not close to major centres.

As some of the members have reminded us, the armed forces and our veterans are a unilateral federal responsibility. There is a deep concern, for example, with the hospitals and the long-term care centres, such as the Kipnes Centre for Veterans in Edmonton. I am very proud it exists; it is a fantastic centre. It is very important that we think about the future of those services.

We have a good number of veterans returning home. As we have lost World War I veterans and we are slowly losing the World War II veterans who will not be using those services anymore, it is important that those high-quality services be available to all our veterans. They should all be equal in the way we treat them when they return.

A very dear friend of my father was living at the Kipnes Centre, and I had a chance to visit him there. He was very upset because his wife, who was not a member of the armed forces, could not live with him, and he therefore entered into a deep depression.

There are many policies that merit being looked into again. With a small expenditure of money, we may be able to serve our veterans in a better way. A 1-800 number is not sufficient. I get complaints all the time in my office about 1-800 numbers to other services, such as pensions, immigration and so forth. Let us ensure the veterans are better looked after.

● (1150)

I would like to close with a quote from the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore that he shared with us before the Christmas break. It was on the tombstone of a fallen World War I soldier. It says, “This Canadian soldier left his home so that you can live in yours”.

That is something for us to keep in mind. It is very important that we make sure these services are available to all of our veterans.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to share this with my colleague and get her comments. I had a situation where I needed to call Veterans Affairs. I called 411 and got the number. After 4:30, the response was “Thank you for calling Veterans Affairs. If this is an emergency dial 911 or go to the closest hospital.” What if a veteran who is suffering from post traumatic stress disorder and is contemplating suicide, and there are a lot of triggers there, calls that number?

I am wondering if my colleague has any thoughts or anything to share about how this veteran would react.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I am personally looking forward to travelling to Edmonton tomorrow with the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore. We will be meeting with a number of veterans organizations, and I am hoping I will not hear those kinds of stories. However, if I do, my response would be as I mentioned in my brief comments here today. It is not for the veterans to be reaching out and seeking help. It is our obligation as Canadians. It is the obligation of the government to ensure it reaches out to each and every soldier who returns home from any mission and to follow through where there is any suggestion of an issue. It is important that it reaches out to the families of the veterans and watches for any kind of concern. Simply calling a 1-800 line is not appropriate in the case of someone under mental distress.

● (1155)

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, as the member of Parliament for LaSalle—Émard, I have the pleasure of having Royal Canadian Legion Branch 212 in my riding. There are about 77 veterans who frequently go to the Legion, as a meeting place and getting together, and sharing stories, quite often about hardships. I also had the pleasure of participating in their Christmas dinner. There were 150 people present, showing support. There are a lot of different activities to support our veterans, and I have noticed the relationship among veterans, but also among the volunteers of the Legions.

I feel that the lack of personalized service to the veterans will be very detrimental to their care. I was wondering if in her riding she feels that the veterans will be affected by the lack of personalized assiduous services for veterans.

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for her question and for sharing with us how active the Legion is in her community. In my riding, unfortunately, the Legion has been struggling. There is stress simply trying to keep a service available for veterans.

Business of Supply

We have a whole new group of post-World War II veterans. They have served overseas, including in Afghanistan. It is very important for us to recognize that the numbers of our veterans are not declining. In fact, we have a good number of veterans. While they have not come out of a World War I, they are going to need similar personal support. Certainly we are seeing that with the suicides from the recently deployed soldiers.

There absolutely should be personal service, but I would suggest that needs to be very early on, and followed through on, not waiting until a crisis point.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Raymond Côté (Beauport—Limoilou, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague from Edmonton—Strathcona for her speech.

Yvan Thauvette, the national president of the Union of Veterans Employees, made the following comment in reference to the Sydney office closure: “For example, how is one worker going to make up for the loss of 13 [skilled workers] who serve 4,200 clients in the Sydney office?”

It is already remarkable that one very skilled Veterans Affairs employee can manage 350 cases, some of which are sometimes very complex. What does my colleague have to say about staff cuts that will result in one employee serving 4,200 veterans?

[*English*]

Ms. Linda Duncan: Mr. Speaker, obviously that is not a good direction.

We have been advised that there are at least 100 vacancies in mental health positions in Veterans Affairs. In having been a senior civil servant myself, I know there is the opportunity to set priorities on hiring. We would certainly encourage that. In fact, our motion calls for the Department of Veterans Affairs to step up the pace on the hiring of mental health workers; it is the least we can do. Then we can move forward and examine additional strategies.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé (Saint-Lambert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to express my sadness and, more importantly, my indignation at how this government is treating members of our military and our veterans.

I am honoured to give my support to these courageous men who have given so much and who are so dedicated to our country and our values.

Canada has always been a top defender of the rights and freedoms that all Canadians cherish.

The men and woman in the Canadian Armed Forces are called upon to risk their lives to protect our rights and freedoms. We thank them for the huge sacrifice that they make for all of us.

Our society is indebted to these exceptional men and women for their commitment. No matter what happens to them during their mission, our soldiers, our veterans and their families must know that they can count on our ongoing support.

Once again, this government is shirking its responsibility. It has broken the social pact between Canada and its army.

Once again, the actions of this government and the cavalier approach of its members show just how cynical the Conservatives can be towards the Canadian public.

I want to remind members of the latest facts in this case, which shed a cold hard light on the Conservatives' blindness towards the state of our veterans and members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

In two months, eight members of the military of all ranks have chosen to take their own life.

What is the Minister of Veterans Affairs doing to try to deal with this issue? Has he announced more mental health measures for soldiers or a new approach to treat post traumatic stress disorder? No.

The minister is toeing the Conservative government line. He is taking a dollars and cents approach and cutting the services that are needed the most.

While the people who shed their blood to defend this country are taking their own lives out of desperation, the minister is closing veterans' service centres.

The offices in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland will be closed as of tomorrow. The one in Prince George, B.C., has already been closed.

Trying to face the criticism, the Prime Minister maintained that veterans who use the offices that are closing could rely on Service Canada, especially its online and remote services.

Consider this example of the quality of those services. Corporal Bruce Moncur, who was wounded in Afghanistan in 2006, is a young man who knows how to use a computer. This non-commissioned officer told the media that he spent a week wading through departmental bureaucracy before he was able to fill out his forms online.

Now imagine a 90-year-old veteran trying to deal with the same situation. Can anyone reasonably believe that a 90-year-old veteran could easily access any service at all on the Internet? Clearly, the Conservatives want nothing to do with anyone who is having difficulties.

Even more appalling than cutting services to those who fought and suffered to defend our values is the attitude of the minister responsible for veterans. On Tuesday, when he was supposed to meet with veterans' representatives who had come to share their concerns, the minister first wanted to skip that meeting. Then, after changing his mind, he met with them, but only to slam the door in their faces even harder.

This caused such an uproar across the country that veterans' associations and members of the Royal Canadian Legion were calling for the minister to step down.

Business of Supply

Betraying those who loyally served this country was not enough for the government; through the hon. member for Edmonton Centre, the government suggested that these veterans, including some who fought during the Second World War, were being manipulated by the media and the Public Service Alliance of Canada. This is absolutely ludicrous.

Who could reasonably believe that soldiers who survived the Normandy invasion, the Korean War or the mission in Afghanistan could be so easily manipulated? The reality is that this government has an unfair policy of taking away more and more from the weak and the disadvantaged.

● (1200)

It applies this ideology mechanically, without an ounce of humanity. It stops at nothing. The proof is that the Department of Veterans Affairs had the nerve to ask Corporal Leona MacEachern's family to return \$581 of her disability pension because the money was paid out after she committed suicide on Christmas day.

All public services are being affected by this destructive policy. All Canadians are being made to suffer. The government is causing the people of this country immense harm that cannot be undone with empty apologies. To correct the injustice wreaked upon them by this government, we must deal with our soldiers and our veterans in ways they can understand: we must take action and be honourable.

We, the members of the NDP, are calmly surveying the reality, without any preconceived ideas. The NDP has always led the way with its proposals to improve programs and services for serving and retired members of the Canadian Armed Forces and their families. That is why, today, the NDP has a simple and practical response to the crisis that our soldiers and veterans are going through. First and foremost, we have a duty to provide access to appropriate mental health care for all military personnel and veterans and their families suffering from post traumatic stress disorder or operational stress injuries. This requires two sets of actions.

First, members of the Canadian Forces who need this help must be encouraged to ask for it. We understand that it is difficult for people in military life to ask for outside help. However, that help does exist and it is effective. Too few of our soldiers ask for that help. We have to encourage and support them.

However, there are still too few material supports. To remedy the situation and to provide as much access as possible, we must hire as many mental health specialists as are required. We should not be looking at the cost when it comes to this matter. Our soldiers risk their lives. They should not have to beg for help.

The transition to civilian life is also a crucial step for our soldiers, and we can help with that. We all know how important it is to get into the job market and to feel useful. Every man and woman has the right to this dignity and so do our soldiers who are returning to civilian life.

We must therefore expand existing programs, such as the program that helps military members transition to careers in shipbuilding. In addition, we must also create new opportunities through federal incentives to hire veterans. Our veterans must have access to personalized service from the federal government no matter what

their age. The government therefore needs to immediately reverse its decision to close offices that provide services for veterans.

Finally, to support families mourning the loss of a soldier to suicide, we must do everything we can to shed some light on the circumstances surrounding such tragedies. The government must immediately increase its efforts to conclude the outstanding boards of inquiry on military suicides.

In conclusion, I would like to read the Act of Remembrance, which states the following:

They shall grow not old,
as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them,
nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun
And in the morning
We shall remember them.

We will remember them. Today, the time has come for us to remember them. That is why I am calling on all members, wherever they come from, to support this motion. Let us show some compassion for our veterans. Let us extend them a helping hand. They deserve it.

● (1205)

[*English*]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the member opposite is aware that on December 10, 2013, the senior leadership of the Union of Veterans Affairs Employees and the Public Service Alliance of Canada fabricated and then falsely attributed a comment to one of our employees at Veterans Affairs Canada pertaining to the duration of the placement of Veterans Affairs client services agents to the Service Canada locations nearest to a transferring district office.

This particular employee found herself in a very difficult predicament in that she was quoted falsely, and that false information was then used to fabricate information that was widely circulated to the media. This fearmongering created undue concern with regard to the veterans offices being closed.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, first, I would like to once again express my gratitude for the men and women who are members of the two legions in my riding, Royal Canadian Legion Branch 68 in Saint-Lambert and Royal Canadian Legion Branch 94 in Greenfield Park.

I am a psychologist by training and, in response to the minister, I would like to say that psychological intervention is something that needs to be done immediately. When men and women are in distress, it is not time to call a 1-800 number. They must have the opportunity to build relationships and to have someone there with them to hold their hand and support them so that they can cope with their post-traumatic stress.

● (1210)

Mr. Ted Hsu (Kingston and the Islands, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I received many emails from the people of Kingston and the Islands.

Business of Supply

[English]

A lot of them have been furious, whether veterans or family and friends of veterans. They are furious at what has transpired in the last couple of days.

I want to ask my colleague how she thinks they would feel if I told them that the government said it would hire a number of mental health professionals and then did not, and then announced again it would hire these professionals without actually hiring them. How does the member think they would react to that inaction?

[Translation]

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for his question.

It is clear with this file—now more than ever—and with other files as well, that the government is yet again choosing to ignore a Canada-wide wave of protest. Men and women are standing up in communities across this country to tell the government to reverse its decision, yet it continues to move forward with a decision that will deprive men and women of an important service that is crucial to helping them get back on their feet, giving them hope, and enabling these families to move on after the war in Afghanistan, or any other war they fought in. We know it is true and we keep repeating it.

That lack of gratitude cannot go unmentioned. I cannot find the words to express it, but I am completely revolted and outraged by this indescribable attitude.

Ms. Hélène LeBlanc (LaSalle—Émard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the hon. member for Saint-Lambert for her speech. She very eloquently expressed what the official opposition, veterans and their loved ones are feeling.

I would like to tell her about an activity that is organized by the LaSalle legion. Once a year, the ladies auxiliary meets with veterans from Ste. Anne's Hospital. There is also the issue of how the Conservative government washed its hands of its responsibilities for care at the Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue Hospital. We want to highlight the importance of personalizing care and understanding the traumatic experiences these veterans have been through.

Mrs. Sadia Groguhé: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for her comment.

Once again, she focused on how important it is to have personalized care. People in distress should not have to deal with a machine. That is unthinkable. I would also like to point out that this government has done nothing but talk, when what we really need is action.

I would like to point out that, since coming to power, the Conservatives have cut over \$225 million from the Veterans Affairs budget, thereby eliminating one-quarter of the department's employees and services. How are we supposed to take care of our veterans when the government has made such inexcusable cuts?

[English]

Mr. James Bezan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be splitting my time with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs.

Let me begin by extending my deepest and heartfelt condolences to all those who have been affected by the recent tragedies. Our thoughts and prayers are with these individuals' families, friends, and the entire Canadian military family.

The suicide of a family member or a close friend is a profound life-altering event, and I am sure many of us in the House today can attest to that. It is a tragedy in the true sense of the word. Let me say clearly here in the House that we all have a responsibility for those around us. Let us continue to break down the stigmas attached to mental health issues.

As with many of my colleagues in the House this week, my heart was warmed by the tremendous response by all Canadians to Bell's Let's Talk Day on January 28. Canadians from coast to coast to coast reached out to each other through various media, including social media, to let Canadians suffering from mental health conditions know they are not alone. Every Canadian has a stake in this important issue.

Only by recognizing symptoms, coming forward, and getting help when we need it can we really tackle mental health conditions. That is why in 2012 our government announced an additional \$11.4 million investment to enhance the Canadian Armed Forces' mental health programs. That was in addition to the approximately \$420 million spent annually on Canadian Forces health care, including \$50 million specifically for mental health.

The men and women in uniform who serve our country with such distinction are subject to unique dangers and events. Being a member of the Canadian Armed Forces is more than a job; it is a way of life. Every single day, our men and women in uniform willingly put service before self to serve this country, having made the commitment to protect the security of Canada and Canadians. They can be called to deploy at a moment's notice to serve on operations, either at home or abroad, leaving their families, their friends, and the comforts of home behind.

The array of jobs in the Canadian Armed Forces involves physical danger. Of that there is no doubt. Yet we must also recognize the great mental stresses in many aspects of military life, whether someone is deployed overseas or at home.

We take the issue of member suicide very seriously. Great efforts are made to identify members at risk for mental health problems and to provide them with assistance in the form of treatment, counselling, and other types of support.

When speaking of military suicide, the topic of post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, and other operational stress injuries, OSI, is inevitably raised. Canada is a recognized world leader in fighting the stigmatization of mental illness and raising awareness of both PTSD and OSI.

Over the past decade, the Canadian Armed Forces has put in place a series of programs to increase the effectiveness of care for deployment-related problems. It starts with prevention.

Business of Supply

We have increased mental health awareness by bringing together a host of players to build a national education strategy that is enhancing the services already available to CAF members and their families. The road to mental readiness program is now being implemented for CAF leadership, CAF personnel, and their families.

Mental health and operational stress issues are also included in the leadership training curriculum to ensure that these issues are understood and respected across all ranks of the Canadian Armed Forces.

To date, over 50,000 Canadian Armed Forces members have received some form of mental health training and education, and we have a comprehensive pre- and post-deployment program to assist members in dealing with the challenges of a deployment. This includes pre-deployment screenings and training for mental readiness and enhanced post-deployment screening, providing an evaluation of both physical and psychological health.

When treatment for PTSD is required, the Canadian Armed Forces is guided by best practices, with an emphasis on early detection and timely access to evidence-based care. Care for those members suffering from PTSD is available through a variety of initiatives.

Seven centres have been established, in Ottawa, Halifax, Valcartier, Edmonton, Victoria, Gaagetown, and Petawawa, and they are integrated into an enhanced system of interdisciplinary mental health care.

The operational stress injuries social support program, OSISS, is a national peer support network for injured members and their families to address the issue of stigma. It also includes a bereavement peer support program to help those who have lost loved ones.

• (1215)

The Canadian Forces member assistance program is a voluntary confidential advisory service to help members and their families with personal concerns. A toll-free phone line is open 24 hours a day and is staffed by professionals. As well, the integrated personnel support centres that exist in partnership with Veterans Affairs Canada provide a full range of support and referral services. We are also active in research.

The Department of National Defence works collaboratively with Veterans Affairs and the RCMP on educational best practices and the development of a joint mental health strategy through the joint mental health care project. The Department of National Defence continues to conduct research with other centres and our international allies on the understanding of post traumatic stress disorder.

Finally, in September of last year, the Surgeon General's mental health strategy was released. It took an open and honest look at the state and impact of mental illness in the Canadian Armed Forces and in Canadian society, identifying areas to improve and set priorities and areas of focus for the next five years. The strategic priorities include increased partnerships of internal and external agencies, improved efficiency of the mental health system, and improved internal and external communications.

I would also like to take a few moments to clarify the role and purpose of the boards of inquiry. As soon as we learn of a suicide of a Canadian Armed Forces member, a medical professional technical

suicide review is ordered by the Surgeon General. It quickly and thoroughly ascertains the circumstances surrounding the death, whether action could have been taken to prevent it, given the information available at the time, and it provides immediate information on whether Canadian Armed Forces processes, procedures, and programs should be revised.

In contrast, a board of inquiry is an internal, non-judicial, administrative fact-finding investigation convened to examine and report on complex or significant events. It is intended to allow the Chief of the Defence Staff and other members of the chain of command to obtain a better understanding of incidents affecting the functioning of the Canadian Armed Forces. A board of inquiry, therefore, is not specifically convened only in the event of a military suicide. However, it is Canadian Armed Forces policy to conduct a board of inquiry for every instance of suicide in the forces.

I can tell the House that the Minister of National Defence has expressed serious concerns to the chain of command regarding the outstanding boards of inquiry, as we have just heard. As a result, the Chief of the Defence Staff has recently directed a dedicated team to be convened to close outstanding boards of inquiry as quickly as possible. Both of these processes provided us with an opportunity to improve the system to help reduce the risk of suicide in the future.

The Canadian Armed Forces has made tremendous strides in recent years in supporting military personnel who suffer from deployment-related mental health conditions. Today, we have approximately 400 full-time mental health professionals and we are working to hire more. We have provided mental health care through 38 priority care clinics and detachments and 26 mental health clinics across Canada, and support is provided throughout the entire career of a member.

We expect a lot from our members of the Canadian Armed Forces and they deliver ever single day. Their jobs come with risks and bring challenges that most of us in the House never have to face. Those members suffering from mental health issues deserve our help. It is a moral obligation of our society. For those who would sacrifice their lives for us, it is really the least that we can do, and these members can rest assured that this government is committed to building upon the work we have done when it comes to dealing with mental illness in the Canadian Armed Forces and doing all we can to prevent military suicides.

However, this is not something we can do on our own. One important and concrete step we can take together as a society is to work to eliminate the stigma around mental health issues and, most of all, encourage those in need to seek help.

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•(1220)

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for the information that the minister now has a dedicated team to finalize these outstanding boards of inquiry. This is something that should have been done an awful long time ago. Therefore, my question to him, with great respect, is why it has taken this long. Some of these inquiries have been outstanding for over five years. I cannot speak for the member, but I think he would agree with me that is way too long.

I am wondering why it has taken so long for this action to happen, although I appreciate the action taken. When will we see concrete results for the families of those who have suffered?

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Speaker, as the minister said earlier, he has made this a priority. The Chief of the Defence Staff has now made this a priority and has instructed those involved to collaborate and work together to finalize these inquiries as quickly as possible. It is my understanding that many of them are very close to being finalized and reporting back. We will continue to make sure that this type of delay does not happen ever again, because it is unacceptable.

I want to remind everyone that these boards of inquiry are not all about the suicides of the last five years; they also involve other events that have happened within the Canadian Armed Forces. However, at the same time we want priority to be given to the ones involving the suicides that have unfortunately been committed, so that we can develop policies and, hopefully, prevention programs in the future to help guide the decision-making process.

•(1225)

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, as a member with the 39 Canadian Brigade Group headquarters right in my riding of Vancouver Quadra, I appreciate the work of reservists in the Canadian Armed Forces. The member will know there is concern that when reservists come back from operations, there is not the same framework of oversight as there is for full-time service members.

The report of the committee on PTSD four years ago provided some recommendations for improving the monitoring and screening of reservists and armed forces members themselves. Would the member assure us that the government will put in place the measures that were called for in the 2009 committee report?

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Speaker, I just want to remind the member that right now at the national defence committee, of which she is a member, we are dealing with a report on the care of the ill and injured and how we take care of those members of the Canadian Armed Forces. As we go forward in drafting that report and putting together recommendations, I would encourage my colleague to make sure that we look back at those previous recommendations and see which ones should be incorporated.

I agree with the member that we have a lot to be thankful for as a result of those who serve in the reserves. In communities that have an armed forces base where reserve units are situated, people have the opportunity to visit wounded warrior clinics and take part in operational stress injury support programs, as well as in all the other peer review and peer support organizations within the family at that armed forces base. With respect to smaller communities with reserve units, we do have to look at ways of extending supports and

providing the assistance they need. That definitely is something the military is considering.

Mr. Parm Gill (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the motion before us and first and foremost to express my deepest sympathies to those families who have recently lost a loved one in such sad and tragic circumstances.

Our hearts ache for them, and we are committed to doing whatever it takes to address the complex factors and realities of suicide. There are no simple solutions. We understand that, but we are determined to do everything we can to overcome the stigma that is still attached to mental illness and to encourage all Canadians in need to seek help when they are suffering.

As well, I believe all Canadians deserve to know that their government, our government, is proud to stand with the men and women who wear our nation's uniform, past and present. In fact, if anyone were to look at the Government of Canada's record, if they were to look at it in a truly fair and objective way, I sincerely believe they would agree that we have matched our heartfelt words of gratitude with real and meaningful action.

With my 10 minutes, I would like to demonstrate how Canadians can be proud of what their country is doing to care for and support the men and women who have served our country so well.

Our government's efforts on behalf of veterans and their families begin at Veterans Affairs Canada, which has an annual budget of close to \$3.6 billion. Some people will ask if \$3.6 billion is enough. Obviously we could always spend more—every department could—but to put Veterans Affairs Canada's current budget in perspective, it is already \$785 million more than what the Government of Canada allotted to the department in 2005. That amounts to a 27.5% jump in the department's budget over the past eight years, a time that I am sure I do not need to remind the House has been economically challenging, to say the least.

In fact, since 2006, when our government implemented the new veterans charter that had been unanimously passed by the House, we have invested a total of almost \$4.7 billion in new funding to enhance veterans' benefits programs and services. As significant as this new funding is, however, it still tells only a small part of our story. What is far more important is how this money is being spent.

Before we introduced the new veterans charter, all Canada could do for its veterans was to provide them primarily with disability pensions, most of which are valued at an average of \$800 per month for a single veteran, along with some related health care and case management services.

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At best, Canada was simply providing injured and ill veterans a monthly cheque and wishing them well. At worst, we were encouraging increasingly younger veterans to spend the rest of their lives focused on proving their health was deteriorating, solely so they might receive a modest increase to their monthly pensions.

The new veterans charter turned this around by focusing on ability over disability. By shifting to a more modern and complete approach, Canada can now provide both the immediate and the long-term financial support that injured veterans and their families need while also offering what they still want most: to make the best recovery possible as quickly as possible.

Through the new veterans charter we are doing that. We are providing the kind of care and support veterans need to make a successful transition to civilian life. This includes full medical, psychosocial, and vocational rehabilitation services through career transition services, financial benefits, health care benefits, and one-on-one case management services.

• (1230)

What does all this mean for veterans on a practical level? It means many things. For example, it means that veterans with a rehabilitation need related to their service may be eligible for up to \$75,800 in training assistance to start a new career. If the veteran is too seriously injured to work again, we will transfer the vocational support to his or her spouse and provide a series of financial benefits.

As well, if the veteran has a health problem that is creating a severe and permanent impairment for which they have received a disability award, the financial benefits they are entitled to will result in an annual minimum pre-tax income of \$42,426. That is in addition to a tax-free disability award that may be awarded and can be valued at up to \$301,275.

On top of this, we have a collection of programs to help veterans with their daily needs. For example, we help veterans with shovelling snow from their driveways and with cutting their grass. We also have meals prepared in their homes or delivered to their front doors. We can ensure home visits by health care professionals and case managers for veterans who need them.

We can reimburse veterans for the cost of travelling to their medical appointments, and in some cases we can even pick up the tab when veterans need someone to accompany them to their doctor appointments.

We are also committed to making improvements on what we are already doing. To that end, the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs is currently in the process of conducting a comprehensive review of the new veterans charter. We want the committee to go beyond the significant enhancements we implemented two years ago and to study the entire new veterans charter with a special focus on seriously injured veterans, as well as support for families and the delivery of programs by the department.

We believe this review is exactly what is needed. We believe it offers the appropriate forum for all Canadians to participate in an open and frank discussion about the right and responsible ways to enhance our support to veterans and their families.

Canadians rightly want to know that their government is here for Canada's veterans and their families. I am proud to say that we are, always have been, and always will be.

• (1235)

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Juan de Fuca, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my question to the member is based on my own experience in my riding, where there is a very large military base and where lots of veterans have settled.

In the follow-up to Remembrance Day, I was privileged to have our leader, the Leader of the Opposition, with me at the Esquimalt Royal Canadian Legion, where we sat down for lunch with injured veterans.

Today the government has been talking about all the great improvements it has made. Unfortunately, that is just not the way it is actually seen by the injured veterans in my riding. I do not know how the government explains, after all its statistics and the things it claims to have done, the fact that veterans just do not feel that they are getting the services they need.

Even more disturbing was the fact that those who came to the meeting reported that others were afraid to come and sit down with the Leader of the Opposition at the Esquimalt Legion because of the past abuses of the medical records of those who had spoken out.

I would like to know how the member explains, given all the positive things he had to say about what the government has done, the fact that the injured veterans themselves just do not see the services they need being delivered.

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, like the member opposite, I also travel. I also speak to veterans in my riding at every opportunity I get, whether I am attending an event or calling them in and meeting with them at the Legion and so on. I can assure the member that for the most part veterans are very pleased with the way the government is providing benefits and services.

Are there challenges? Are there opportunities to make things better? Absolutely, there are. That is part of the reason we have launched a comprehensive review of the new veterans charter. We invite all Canadians, stakeholders, veterans, and family members to come forward, talk to the committee, and share their experience and the ideas they may have for improving the new veterans charter. We are always looking at ways of improving, and we will continue to do that.

The commitment that the government has toward Canada's veterans is a top priority, as I can assure the member opposite, and I look forward to working with him.

Mr. Scott Simms (Bonavista—Gander—Grand Falls—Windsor, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have a specific question to discuss with the parliamentary secretary. It is about the points of service that we are talking about, which are now being converted through the closure of these offices into points of service with Service Canada.

One of the issues of concern that was brought to my attention was that the employees at these points of service might not be ready for the type of service that greets them at the door. I am not putting down the people who work at Service Canada. What I mean to say is that there are people who work in the offices that are being shut down who have gained a certain expertise through the experience of working with people with PTSD, for example.

Even though there are more points of service, it is possible that the level of expertise just may not be there to handle these people at the very beginning. Have the Conservatives discussed that issue? Have they looked into training these people at that level?

● (1240)

Mr. Parm Gill: Mr. Speaker, I thank my colleague for the opportunity to clarify the training that will be provided to Service Canada employees.

I can absolutely assure the member that the training for Service Canada employees is being provided. They will be trained. On top of that, we will also be placing one fully trained Veterans Affairs Canada employee in each of the Service Canada offices that are closest to a district office that is being closed.

I can assure the member opposite and all members of the House that we will continue to evaluate. We will make sure that the veterans are receiving the services and the benefits that they deserve. That is our responsibility.

Once again, I would like to point out that along with the 600 new Service Canada offices that will be providing these services, there are still approximately another 50 Veterans Affairs Canada offices that will continue to provide the same services.

Mr. Ryan Cleary (St. John's South—Mount Pearl, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I stand in support of this motion put forward by the hon. member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant. The motion would immediately address the mental health crisis facing Canadian soldiers and veterans by hiring appropriate mental health professionals, by reversing the decision to close veterans offices, and by prioritizing and concluding more than 50 outstanding boards of inquiry on military suicides, so that grieving families might have answers and closure.

I want to begin with the story that I tell every November 11, Remembrance Day. I share the same story every July 1. July 1 is known far and wide as Canada Day, but in Newfoundland and Labrador July 1 is also Memorial Day. Canada Day does not begin in my province until noon on July 1. Until then it is Memorial Day.

July 1, 1916, is known as the bloodiest day in Newfoundland and Labrador history. On that day, near the small town of Beaumont-Hamel, France, during the Battle of the Somme, 801 Newfoundland and Labrador officers and soldiers, most of whom were in their late teens or early twenties, went over the top. The next morning, only 68 answered the roll call, out of 801. The rest were either killed, wounded, or missing.

A general wrote this to the then prime minister of Newfoundland, Sir Edward Morris, about the courage and discipline displayed by the members of the Newfoundland Regiment in their first battle on the western front at Beaumont-Hamel:

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It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and its assault only failed of success because dead men can advance no further.

I see that statement as the highest compliment to any soldier.

For the small nation of Newfoundland, the loss was absolutely devastating. It was felt in every town, every outport, and every family. The Newfoundland Regiment was renamed the Royal Newfoundland Regiment in 1917, the only time in the history of the British army that such a designation has been given during a time of warfare.

Our First World War soldiers were known as “fighting Newfoundlanders”, a designation that carries over to this day, mostly in reference to the spirit of the fighting Newfoundlander.

Our contribution to the First World War was not just in blood. The debt we took on as a nation to supply a regiment is partly to blame for our financial crisis of the 1930s, which led to Newfoundland surrendering its democracy in 1933 in favour of government by commission. It is the only time that a democracy has been voluntarily surrendered.

Be it the First World War, the Second World War, the Korean War, the Gulf War, or Afghanistan, Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have always stepped forward. When Canadians agree to serve in the forces, they accept what is called unlimited liability, that they may be killed in service. Without question, it is the ultimate sacrifice for Canada. In return, we owe them the best care possible. Our veterans are not getting the best care possible.

Why do I say that? Why do veterans say that? Let us start with mental health. The question of whether Canadian Forces personnel receive timely and appropriate mental health care has been a long-standing concern, especially in light of the fact that Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan is coming to a close and thousands of soldiers are returning home with mental injuries. Many of our soldiers and their families say that they cannot get the help they need.

There have been eight suicides in the past two months alone. As it stands, there are at least 50 outstanding boards of inquiry into suicides of members of the Canadian Forces.

On January 31, tomorrow, eight regional veterans offices will close, including the veterans office in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, my home province. The Corner Brook office provides front-line services to 1,500 veterans on the west coast of the island.

● (1245)

Once the office closes, veterans who are in desperate need of in-person, front-line service will have to travel eight, nine, or ten hours by car to get to the nearest office in St. John's on the east coast of Newfoundland. That is eight, nine, or ten hours.

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The Conservatives say there is always the Internet; there is always the telephone. Back in November during a rally outside the veterans office in Corner Brook, Hedley Smith, a legionnaire from the west coast city, had this to say about the Internet and telephone:

A lot of these [veterans] are deaf, old and crippled and can't understand anything they hear on the telephone. They need one-on-one service. That's the way that it's got to be.

Nineteen-year-old Bertram Hillier was among the soldiers in the last draft of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment who went overseas to fight in the Second World War. He had this to say about the closure of the Corner Brook office:

I haven't got that much education and they help me a lot with filling out forms and things like that.

Everything I want, I come here and there's no problem.

There is a problem now.

Veterans who accepted the unlimited liability, who served their country knowing and prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, now feel abandoned by the current Conservative government.

Veteran members of the Canadian Forces serve our country with courage and distinction. Our responsibility, our duty, is to be there for them in their moment of need, not to abandon them to budget and service cuts. I call that the ultimate insult.

The Conservative government's treatment of our veterans and forces is disgraceful, and it manifested itself this week when a delegation of veterans from across the country, including a veteran from Corner Brook, came to Ottawa for a meeting with the Minister of Veterans Affairs. They came here in a last-ditch bid to persuade the Conservative government to reverse its decision to close the eight remaining Veterans Affairs offices across the country.

What did the Minister of Veterans Affairs do? He left the veterans waiting for 70 minutes, and then he turned his back on the veterans when they got frustrated. The minister has since apologized, which is a start. As the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore said earlier today, "...it was not the minister's finest day."

In the end, the west coast of Newfoundland will still be without a Veterans Affairs office, effective tomorrow.

Corner Brook veteran Paul Davis was a member of the delegation that came here to Ottawa this week. I met with him myself. Mr. Davis is 66, and he had this to say:

We have 1,500 veterans on the west coast who depend on the DVA office in Corner Brook. Now we have nowhere to go with our problems, no one to talk to now.

While there will be one dedicated person at the local Service Canada office to deal with veterans, that one dedicated person will have to do the work of the seven people who worked at the Veterans Affairs office, and that is not going to cut it.

What should happen? Hire long-promised mental health professionals to assist soldiers and veterans. Hire them now. Reverse the decision to close Veterans Affairs offices and prioritize and conclude the more than 50 ongoing boards of inquiry on military suicides. That is what should happen now.

The men and women of our military left heaven on earth—Canada—to serve in what was "hell on earth" in many cases, as the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore said.

The men and women of the Canadian Forces stood on guard for us. They stand on guard for us. Our veterans, seniors in many cases, are now forced to stand on guard for their own because the current Conservative government is not standing on guard for them.

• (1250)

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I thank my hon. colleague for his presentation on this very important motion, which I will be supporting.

We have been told that there are somehow 600 points of contact replacing the Veterans Affairs offices. All of us, as members of Parliament, are hearing from veterans. They want these offices to stay open.

However, we now find that these points of contact, of course, are Service Canada offices, which as members of Parliament, we also know about because we have been hearing from frustrated, angry constituents for months. If they call Service Canada about an overdue EI claim or for information they need on pensions, they wait on hold for over an hour. The Service Canada offices are in no shape to absorb the veterans who will want services.

Can the member comment on what he makes of this claim that there are 600 points of service? Is it not in fact 600 clusters of frustration?

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, that is a very good question. The member is absolutely right. There are 600 points of contact, but those 600 points of contact are Service Canada offices. Will they be able to help the veterans in their time of need? My answer to that is no. In a lot of cases they will be referred to the Internet, for example, and in too many cases that we have heard about veterans who are seniors of 80 or 90-plus years of age cannot use the Internet or the telephone. Their skills are not there on the Internet. Their hearing is not there for the telephone.

The member for Sackville—Eastern Shore mentioned a story in his speech earlier. He spoke about how one veteran recommended that when people call these Service Canada outlets, they actually have a lunch with them, because they are going to be on the telephone that long. Also, veterans who are in immediate need of help are being referred to 911. Therefore, the short answer is no. Those 600 points of contact will not do.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I wonder if my colleague from the NDP could summarize, in the time he has available, the difficulties that military personnel are facing, how they are treated once they declare they have post-traumatic stress disorder, and the short time it takes for the military to drum them out?

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I have spoken to a lot of vets and military personnel. If they come out and just say they are suffering with something, that automatically triggers the zero hour, and the military tries to force them to get out quickly. All the programs they have and everything else they do is like trying to mend Humpty Dumpty after he falls off the wall. They cannot. I wonder if my colleague could comment on this.

Mr. Ryan Cleary: Mr. Speaker, in my previous life before politics, I was a journalist. I was a newspaper editor. I will never forget this story. My newspaper at the time, *The Independent*, carried a story about a Newfoundland and Labradorian veteran who had served in Afghanistan. At one point he held the record for the longest shot, the longest kill. I cannot remember the range, but it was an incredible shot. I think the record was beaten the year after. This veteran talked about what he experienced in the war zone and what he experienced when he was fighting. The point of the story was that when he came back he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. When he reached out for help that he so desperately needed, it was not there.

Too often what happens is members of the military are hesitant. They do not want to step forward because the moment they do step forward and seek help they are removed from the military. The clock starts ticking on their leaving the military. They are basically signing off on the end of their career, so they are hesitant to do that. That is one problem, and when they do leave the military the help is not there for any mental health issues they may have.

• (1255)

Mr. Dan Harris (Scarborough Southwest, NDP): Mr. Speaker, this week's unfortunate events involving the Minister of Veterans Affairs and tomorrow's closing of veterans' centres exposes the soft underbelly of this government beast, a government ruled by uncaring ideology instead of good public policy.

It is indeed an honour and a privilege to rise today to add my voice in defending and honouring our veterans. The reduction in services for our brave men and women who risk their lives for us, for our country, and for our freedom is appalling and without merit. The cowardice on display across the aisle dishonours the great sacrifices made by generations of men and women who have served Canada in its time of need.

Where are the Conservative backbenchers who should be pushing the government to reverse these reckless cuts? They should be joining us in calling for improvements instead of meekly lining up behind the minister and marching veterans into Service Canada to stand in line. They have already stood on the line at Passchendaele; at Vimy Ridge; at the Somme, where my great-grandfather, Lieutenant Louis Rosario Lavoie, made the ultimate sacrifice; in the Spanish Civil War; at Dieppe on D-Day; at Monte Cassino; in Hong Kong; in Korea; in Bosnia; in Afghanistan; and at countless other locations at home and around the world. They have done their time on the line.

Now the current government is asking them to make another sacrifice, and I say, no.

What all Canadians want, what veterans want and deserve, and what we on this side of the House want is for the government to give those who have faithfully served Canada, and their families, the respect and dignity they deserve.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the start of the Great War, I am reminded of my great-grandfather, Harold Riley, who served Canada in both world wars. He was wounded three times in the Great War, came back with shell shock, and suffered regular nightmares for the rest of his life. We did not know what we now do: how to help soldiers who come back home with mental health issues.

We owe it to them to provide all the help we can so that they do not suffer like my great-grandfather and so many others did and so they can lead happy, peaceful lives after that great personal sacrifice.

It is time we act on the over 50 outstanding boards of inquiry on military suicides so that grieving families may have the answers and closure they deserve and so that we may learn how to better prevent more tragedies in the future.

Recent soldiers should be of great concern to Canadians, as they are to New Democrats. Our motion today seeks to address this very important issue.

Last October 1, on the third anniversary of the passing of my grandmother, Ivy Harris, who worked at the GECO munitions plant as a teenager with my great-grandmother, and then at 17 joined the Canadian Women's Army Corps, my father, my uncle, and I became members of the Royal Canadian Legion, Branch 73, in her honour and in honour of all of our family members who have answered our country's call. I feel it is my duty to them to rise to defend all of our veterans. It is about respect and dignity.

In addition, this is also why I will soon be tabling a private member's bill in this House to make Remembrance Day a national statutory holiday. On the 100th year since the start of the war to end all wars, my private member's bill is one way I can personally convey my profound respect for all those who have served our country and continue to faithfully serve our country to this day.

It is time we recommit ourselves wholeheartedly to our veterans. I know that Canadians agree, and I hope soon Conservatives will agree too.

Of course, today we are also talking about the closing of eight veterans' centres across the country. Veterans are going to be asked to stand in Service Canada lines or to suffer through horrific wait times on the phone. We have been hearing for the last year and a half, since Conservatives started cutting Service Canada locations, that we have dropped calls and a degradation in quality and service. Even MPs representing their constituents can sometimes have trouble getting through. Is this what we want to make our veterans do? It is a disgrace to ask our veterans to stand in line after all they have done for our country.

The closing of the veterans' centres is inevitably going to degrade the service they receive.

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●(1300)

After my grandmother became a senior citizen and started to have trouble keeping up the house, the Veterans Affairs' centre was there for her. It helped to provide the services that helped her to stay in her home so she could live out her life in dignity and peace without having to suffer through giving up the home she had lived in for over 50 years.

I cannot fathom why the government would make these changes. It actually spits in the face of veterans when the minister makes such appalling remarks and exhibits behaviour of a crass nature. Sure he apologized, but it should not have happened in the first place. That kind of thing should never happen. To make veterans wait 70 minutes is the level of service they are going to get going to Service Canada offices, and that is exactly the service the minister gave. We think he should resign, and if he does not resign, it is the Prime Minister's responsibility to show respect to our brave men and women by firing him. He has shown time and again, on the F-35 file, on military procurement, and now in Veterans Affairs, that he has absolutely no business being a minister of the crown.

Unfortunately, coming from Toronto, I have had lots of previous experience with this minister, as the head of the OPP and as the Toronto police chief and then as chief of police in London. We would think that after all of those years of service, after all of that experience gained, he would have a bit more compassion and respect for the men and women who wear uniforms for our country.

Of course, the Veterans Affairs centres also serve RCMP veterans, men and women who have defended our streets and kept our streets safe all over the country, sometimes in very remote locations. All of these men and women who have served Canada deserve to have the best kind of service we can offer and the best mental health services we can offer. Sadly, the current government has been sorely lacking in this regard.

Again, why? Is this all about the budget line? Is this all about balancing the books so we can give a whole bunch of tax credits that will not actually help working people and will not help most of the veterans who have served our country? Is that what this is about, the bottom line? This is one area where the bottom line, while always important, should not be the deciding factor. What should be the deciding factor in the kind of services we provide, in the veterans' centres we have, and in what we do to honour their sacrifice is providing the best possible service. That should be the determining factor. However, we are closing veterans' centres all across the country, and we are going to put them in Service Canada locations.

There are 600 points of service. Having 600 point of bad service does not mean improvement in services for veterans. Replacing 13 people who deal with their cases in some offices with one person in the Service Canada office is not improving services. That is one-thirteenth, and that is if they can even get that person. If there is somebody in line in front of them, or if the person is serving someone else, they might be sent off to a telephone or asked to look at a computer to file their claims.

Online service is a whole other issue, and the current government has been lacking there too. Over 90% of EI claimants can file their claims online, but they cannot check the status of their claims online.

Now we want to tell veterans to get their services online and to download an app on their phone. The world is changing, and the face of veterans is changing. They are becoming younger. Those kinds of online services might be good for them, but they are not good for those who came before them. We are asking people in their 80s and 90s to go sit in a Service Canada office and use one of their computers. It is an absolute disgrace. It is a degradation of service and has no business in this House.

We should be doing absolutely everything we can to improve services for veterans to honour that great sacrifice. I have repeated that a couple of times. They have sacrificed everything for our country, and we are not going to do the same for them. We should. We have to. We must, absolutely.

●(1305)

Mr. Mike Wallace (Burlington, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for his speech. I disagree with much of it.

I have been sitting here all day listening to the speeches, and I am a little concerned that some of the speeches from the opposition benches are saying that the 650 or 600 new sites are going to give bad service, that our veterans and the people of Canada are getting bad service. Why do the opposition members consistently attack our civil servants who work at our Service Canada sites across this country? They give excellent service, and on this side, we are proud of the work they are doing. Why are those members not?

Mr. Dan Harris: He must be in the pocket of big union bosses, Mr. Speaker, after that kind of speech.

Does he honestly not hear from his constituents about the bad service they get? The workers in Service Canada locations do an excellent job, without the resources they need to provide the level of service Canadians deserve. There is a big difference between the workers doing a great job and the managers hashing it up.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I have had the opportunity to serve in the Canadian Forces, and it was quite the privilege and honour to do so. When I left the service, one thing I noticed was that the private sector, the government sector, and non-profit groups tend to look at individuals retiring from the forces with a great deal of respect. When they apply for positions, they are often given extra consideration. There are groups, such as Commissionaires Manitoba or Commissionaires in Canada, who will hire retiring military personnel, and it is because of a sense of respect for what members of the forces do.

It has been called into question whether the Minister of Veterans Affairs respects our veterans. Yesterday the leader of the Liberal Party, in question period, put this particular question to the Prime Minister:

...those who have served their country and put themselves in harm's way for all of us deserve our respect, and they deserve our courtesy. The Canadian heroes who tried to meet with their minister yesterday received neither. Will the Prime Minister fire his Minister of Veterans Affairs?

Does the member believe that the Minister of Veterans Affairs has demonstrated respect for our veterans?

Business of Supply

Mr. Dan Harris: Absolutely not, Mr. Speaker. I think he has shown some very poor judgment, and I think the Prime Minister showed some pretty poor judgment in the House yesterday when he basically called the veterans who came in to demand the services they deserve part of the union, that it was a union plot. Guess what? Unions are there for working people, and soldiers and veterans in the military are working people. They work together on getting the services they need and deserve. The unions respect soldiers; why do the Conservatives not?

• (1310)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Mississauga East—Cooksville.

As the member of Parliament for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke and CFB Petawawa, the largest Canadian Forces Base in Canada and training ground of the Warriors, and as a 14-year veteran of the Standing Committee on National Defence, I welcome the opportunity to participate in any debate regarding the well-being of the women and men who serve Canada in uniform.

I mentioned my number of years in service on the Standing Committee on National Defence to highlight that I am not some Johnny-come-lately when it comes to interest in the care of our soldiers. I witnessed the decade of darkness first-hand, and I am proud to say that I voted with the Conservative government and Prime Minister to reverse that decade of neglect.

I have watched in disgust every time our soldiers and veterans have been made into political footballs and kicked around by the opposition. The worst example for our women and men in uniform was the decision by the Liberal Party to use military procurement for partisan purposes and send our soldiers into Afghanistan without the proper equipment. The cancellation of the EH101 military helicopter contract for partisan political reasons cost us the precious lives of Canadian soldiers. It is a fact that once our Conservative government provided the strategic lift for our soldiers to get them off the ground and away from the IEDs that lined the roads of Afghanistan the casualty rate dropped.

Let us be clear. On behalf of all Canadians, the current official opposition, regardless of what it says, does not believe that Canada should have an armed military, and pardon me if I sound cynical every time the Leader of the Opposition invokes the name of our soldiers and veterans and tries to embarrass our government. I am prepared to accept at face value the motion of the member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant to work with all members of Parliament to improve the lives of our soldiers and veterans, as long as the politics are taken out of the discussion and facts are allowed to guide the way to our decision-making. I recognize that government is not perfect and there is always room for improvement.

My riding of Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke is served with a Veterans Affairs office in Pembroke, and a sister office, an integrated personnel support unit, IPSU, at Base Petawawa. Unlike the offices that are being closed, the Pembroke office is a very busy, high-tempo shop with 29 staff members. The caseload in this office is split between traditional Veterans Affairs clients and newer rehabilitation cases, more recent DND veterans. Veterans Affairs and DND work together through the integrated personnel support centre to help

Canadian Armed Forces personnel, regular and reserve alike, and its veterans and their families, to achieve a successful transition from military to civilian life.

IPSCs were founded on the principle that early intervention makes a difference in recovering from illness or injuries and successfully re-establishing civilian life. The IPSC at Base Petawawa provides support to Canadian Armed Forces, ill and injured personnel and veterans and their families, with the focus on the following core functions: the return to work program coordination, casualty support outreach delivery, casualty tracking, casualty administration and advocacy services, support platoon structure to provide military leadership supervision, administration support, and a liaison for military family resource centres with local base support representatives and local unit commanding officers.

Veterans Affairs collaborates with the Department of National Defence to conduct outreach to Canadian Armed Forces personnel veterans and their families to provide them with a clear understanding of the number of programs, services, and supports available to them. This includes conducting transitional interviews with members before they leave the military.

• (1315)

Base Petawawa also operates an operational trauma and stress support centre. These centres were established to meet the needs of Canadian Forces members returning from overseas deployments and suffering from tour-related psychological problems. Operational trauma and stress support centres are an initiative designed to complement the full spectrum of high-quality health services that the Canadian Armed Forces provides to Canada's military personnel wherever and whenever they serve.

This government recognizes the important and selfless contribution of our military men and women. That is why I worked hard, together with all of my colleagues, to provide them with the best health services possible. Because we understand they are more likely to suffer from operational stress injuries such as post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, we know mental health services and support are critical. That is why Veterans Affairs Canada, the Department of National Defence, and the Canadian Armed Forces are working together to ensure that veterans and military members with mental health issues receive the help they need.

Significant investment has been made by the Canadian Armed Forces to ensure that our military members receive the highest standard of mental health care possible. Since 2006, the Canadian Armed Forces health care investment has increased, bringing our expenses in health care close to \$420 million each year. There are no budget cuts when it comes to caring for our military.

Business of Supply

In 2012, the government announced an additional \$11.4-million investment, to enhance the armed forces mental health care system specifically. This brings the total amount of annual mental health investment for military members to \$50 million. These investments translate to approximately 400 mental health professionals dedicated to our men and women in uniform, and we are currently working on bringing in additional qualified applicants to fill the spaces available.

One of the challenges of having a military base in rural Ontario is the shortage of health care professionals for the entire population. Even though the federal Conservative government has struggled to find mental health care professionals for Base Petawawa, we have successfully staffed five doctors for a base population of 6,000 soldiers; compare that to one psychiatrist for a local civilian population of 100,000 people. We have five doctors for the military population of 6,000 and one for the remaining 100,000 people in the civilian population. Is there a health care crisis in Renfrew County? Yes. Is the federal government trying to deal with the provincial shortage? Yes.

To the family and friends of the military members and veterans who have taken their lives in the past and in the recent months, I extend my sincere condolences. Every suicide is a tragedy. As Canadians, we are all affected when one of our Canadian Armed Forces members takes his or her life. We know how much they gave to this country.

Canadians are proud of our armed forces. The Canadian Armed Forces is among the best armed forces in the world. The health of our military members will always be a priority for the Conservative Government of Canada. The strength of our military organization is its people, and we need to continue to take care of them and their families.

Our government is supporting the men and women in uniform in the Canadian Armed Forces who are suffering from mental illness. However, I wish to reiterate the role we play in eliminating the stigma around mental health. Going through mental illness is very difficult, so let us encourage people to seek help, because seeking help is the first step to recovery.

• (1320)

Mr. Peter Stoffer: Mr. Speaker, I am rising on a point of order. I am sorry to interrupt the debate. I want to clarify something that I said earlier in my speech. I made an error. Actually, Kim and Blair Davis are from Lawrencetown, Nova Scotia, not Eastern Passage. I was thinking of someone else. Also, his service was in Bosnia, not Afghanistan. I want to clarify that for the record.

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague for her great speech highlighting investments that the government has made across all veterans services, and our record investment in the Canadian Armed Forces.

We have heard a lot of discussion throughout the day around the points of service for our veterans. I wonder what the member is experiencing in her riding and if she has heard across other ridings what I know to be the case with Service Canada and the expanded points of service in the Yukon Territory and Whitehorse. Our veterans did not have an office, and now we are going to receive services for our veterans, not only with all of the work that is currently being done, but through the addition of a Service Canada

point of service for them. Indeed, I am sure a whole host of other Canadian communities are going to realize some advantages through one of the 600 offices that are being opened.

I am wondering if she could highlight areas in her region that are going to experience an enhancement of service where otherwise they had absolutely no office service delivery.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, in my riding of Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, we are well served by Veterans Affairs, both in the city of Pembroke, where many retired people live, as well as on the base.

However, what I am learning from veterans in other communities is that where there was no official available to help counsel them with services, they will now have it available. They welcome that.

The closures are occurring where there were only 10 or maybe 20 visits per week at most, and in those areas the workers from Veterans Affairs will go to the homes of the people, or anyplace else the veteran would like to meet them. It will be better service one-on-one than before.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I heard the member say that in places where these offices would close the veterans would welcome visits.

Let me give the member some facts and figures on these services that will close. In Corner Brook, the files will be transferred to St. John's, an eight-hour drive. In Sydney, the files will be transferred to Halifax, a five-hour drive. Charlottetown files will not be transferred to the national headquarters; they will be transferred to Halifax, a five-hour to seven-hour drive. In Thunder Bay, they will be transferred to Winnipeg, a nine-hour to ten-hour drive. In Windsor they will be transferred to London, a 2.5-hour drive. From Saskatoon they will go to Regina, a three-hour drive. Brandon will likely go to Shilo, which is a 45-minute drive, or to Winnipeg. From Prince George, they will probably go to Penticton, which is a 10-hour drive, and in Kelowna they will go to Penticton, which is a one-hour drive.

If we put the hours of driving to the hours of service together, there is absolutely no way that service managers will be able to look after all our veterans. As a matter of fact, it is estimated there will be one minute for looking at the files by the service managers—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Order. The hon. member for Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the member outlining all the different VAC offices that are closing and the distances. Those distances will now be travelled by the assisting Veterans Affairs officers. Much of the service is done by phone or over the Internet, but for those who need one-on-one service, we will now be going to them.

Business of Supply

More to the point, when the member's party was in power, the Veterans Affairs committee travelled to Base Petawawa. We had a group of people who were transitioning out due to operational stress injuries. I will always remember the last person who spoke. He came back from Afghanistan. All his buddies had been blown up in a transport carrier. He was the only survivor. He begged for a year for a psychiatrist to meet with him. It was not until that day, a year later, that he received his first psychiatric appointment.

If something like that were to happen today, it is either immediate or within two weeks that a person who requests a psychiatrist would get one. We have gone miles ahead of where the old government could not be bothered to tread.

• (1325)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Djaouida Sellah (Saint-Bruno—Saint-Hubert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague opposite for her speech. I listened closely to the points she made.

Unfortunately, the facts are the facts. Since coming to power, the Conservatives have cut \$225 million from the Veterans Affairs budget and have eliminated one-quarter of the department's employees and services. In proceeding with those cuts, they froze hiring of medical staff for mental health.

I know that when our soldiers agree to be deployed, they accept the liability. They agree to unlimited liability and recognize that they could lose their lives. That is the ultimate sacrifice for Canada. Do these people not have the right to a minimum level of service? I would like to ask the member if she plans to vote for our motion to get things back on track. This is yet another opportunity for her to do that.

[*English*]

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Speaker, what is happening is that if expenses are going toward brick-and-mortar offices that are getting fewer than a dozen visitors a day, we are taking that money and reallocating it to people who can counsel and provide health care for our veterans.

Let us talk about the facts. As far as health care goes, in one year alone we increased funding by \$11.4 million. We continue to commit \$50 million. There have been no cuts to health care, especially mental health care, for our soldiers and veterans.

The member who came in to make a point of order on an error made another error as well in saying that the first time a soldier goes for help is the first day of the end of that soldier's career. That is absolutely false. Everything that is discussed between a medical professional and a soldier who comes for help remains absolutely confidential. The military chain of command does not have access to it.

Instead of spreading false information and causing harm to the people who need help by discouraging them from seeking it, I wish everyone could work together, including the sponsors of this motion, to ensure that people have the courage and the willingness to go ahead and seek help.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is a privilege to stand in this House and confirm our

government's full and continued support for men and women who have served our country so well.

It is a special moment for me, because since my election in 2011, I have been serving on the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, and everything that is related to veterans is very dear to me.

Canada's veterans represent the very best of what it means to be Canadian. They have served with courage, distinction, and honour. They have always put country and service before all else to defend our cherished way of life, often at great sacrifice to their families and themselves. They have helped to bring peace and freedom to many places around the world that had known only violence and oppression.

That is their proud history, and it is why our nation is now the envy of the world. It is also why our government is committed to recognizing their service and honouring their sacrifice every day. That is our record, our history. We have made it an extraordinary priority to ensure veterans and their families receive the care and support they need and receive it when they need it. That is why our government has always insisted that veterans' benefits and services be maintained and enhanced, no matter what economic times we might find ourselves in.

That is why Veterans Affairs Canada's annual budget has increased by almost \$785 million this year over 2005. That is why we have invested almost \$4.7 billion in new funding to enhance veterans' benefits, programs, and services. We are committed to serving veterans as they have always served our great country.

With the time I have remaining, I would like to highlight some of the many ways we are working to serve veterans and their families better and faster and in more modern and convenient ways.

I am sure most members in this House are familiar with our government's cutting red tape for veterans initiative. We launched it in February 2012 with the single-minded purpose of providing veterans and their families with faster, hassle-free service, and that is what we have been doing.

We have been streamlining Veterans Affairs Canada's business processes, simplifying the department's policies and programs, and making greater use of new technology and e-services.

The results so far have been impressive, with improved turnaround time for processing veterans' disability benefits. Access to rehabilitation services is now being approved in just two weeks, instead of four. We have reduced the number of forms and the length of the forms veterans have to fill out, and we have placed a renewed emphasis on using plain language in our correspondence with veterans and their families.

Business of Supply

That is just the start of what we have accomplished. By the time this five-year initiative is fully implemented, our programs, benefits, and services will be the most responsive, inclusive, and flexible that Canada's veterans have ever seen, and we will be delivering them as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

Veterans are already reaping many of the benefits. Just last fall, for example, the Minister of Veterans Affairs announced a new approach to our vocational rehabilitation program that gives veterans improved access to about \$75,800 in training to start a new career. This is great news for approximately 1,300 veterans participating in our vocational rehabilitation and vocational assessment services.

These changes also build on other recent enhancements. For example, we have simplified our process for reimbursing veterans for travel costs to and from their medical appointments. This means that approximately 17,000 veterans no longer need to send receipts to the department or verify their appointments with it to recover their travel expenses.

• (1330)

This one change has eliminated a lot of cumbersome paperwork for eligible veterans, and it is putting money back into their pockets faster. We are doing the same for the more than 100,000 veterans, widows, and caregivers who use the veterans independence program. Last year, we began providing upfront payments for snow clearing, lawn cutting, and housekeeping services. Veterans no longer have to pay out of their own pockets for these services and then wait to be reimbursed.

These kinds of changes make a real difference. They represent real results for veterans. They also allow Veterans Affairs Canada's employees more time to provide the extremely high-quality service to veterans that they are best suited to offer.

Another way we are doing that is by introducing a full suite of e-services for veterans who prefer to go online for the information and assistance they want. These new e-services include the new veterans' benefits browser, which helps visitors to our website quickly determine which benefits and services are most relevant to them; the new "My VAC Book", which is a customized, print-on-demand brochure that puts important information at veterans' fingertips; and the enhanced My VAC Account, which provides veterans with secure 24/7 online access to the department from anywhere in the world.

Of course, some veterans, like some Canadians, still prefer the traditional approach to service—that is, speaking to a clerk, an agent, or a teller face to face. We understand that. We get it. That is why our government has been expanding veterans' services in those areas with the largest populations of veterans. That was the *raison d'être*, back in 2009, for establishing the integrated personnel support centres on Canadian Armed Forces bases and wings. Today we have 24 such centres across the country, as well as seven satellite offices, so that military personnel and veterans who are in the process of releasing can have one central point of service for assistance from VAC and DND employees who are working side by side. It is also why, more recently, we have been expanding VAC services into the nearly 600 Service Canada locations nationwide. Through this single change, we are giving veterans and their families new points of

contact and greater access to professionally trained front-line employees in their own communities.

Our government believes that veterans deserve more options and more choices when it comes to dealing with Veterans Affairs Canada. Through the many innovations we are introducing, our government is proud to be delivering, with better and faster service.

• (1335)

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Mr. Speaker, my father was a vet of World War II. He dealt with the medical corps, serving overseas with those who were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. We are seeing that now. We are seeing, just here in Ottawa, major lineups and wait times for our veterans who are trying to get services.

I hear the language. I hear "600 points of contact" and "streamlined". "Plain language" was the one that jumped out at me. My colleague was talking about plain language, and the plain language that we need to talk about today is the fact that tomorrow, services will be shut down. The door will be closed to the vets who need those services.

When I hear that we are going to have online services and we are going to streamline and have "more options and more choices", I have to ask who they are talking to. I think what we are seeing is an internal kind of structure within the department coming up with all these streamlined ideas and "better services", while on the ground, everyday people who need the service are not being talked to.

Therefore, my question is this: does my colleague not believe the veterans who were here yesterday? They said they do not believe this is going to help them, that they need those services. They said not to shut the offices down tomorrow.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Speaker, we discussed all of these issues at the committee meetings. We have done studies. We have members from both sides of the House on the committee. I do not quite understand the logic behind the opposition claims; it is as if anything new that is done is wrong.

We cannot continue the status quo. Times are changing. There are new technologies available. The population of our veterans is changing.

Over a million brave Canadians served in the Canadian Armed Forces in the Second World War. Those who are still alive are in their nineties or older and require a different approach than the young veterans who are released from the Canadian Armed Forces now. Therefore, we have to look at different approaches for the different veterans we have in Canada. They deserve the service for their service to this country.

• (1340)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am paraphrasing, but the member just said that they deserve the service.

Business of Supply

In Charlottetown, we have 2,138 veterans who are going to the VAC centre looking for service. If it closes in Charlottetown, it will go to Halifax, which is five to seven hours away.

I know of a veteran in Charlottetown who is close to or might be 90 years old. I hope he is watching. He has no computer. He has a rotary dial phone that he does not want to get rid of because it reminds him of when his wife brought it home. He cannot punch the number 1 or the number 2.

I am wondering if the member will volunteer to pick him up and drive him, because certainly the staff in Halifax will not go to Charlottetown every single day to watch not only him but also other veterans. I am wondering if the member wants to retract the words he just said.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon: Mr. Speaker, I will not retract anything. I actually believe that the people who serve our country deserve our respect and deserve the services that are available for veterans.

The veteran he mentioned does not need to drive anywhere. He will get his services in the place where he lives.

It is awkward to hear that question from the member who was part of a government that introduced the deepest cuts to veterans in this country in the recent history of Canada. In the cuts that he voted for, veterans were cut off from their benefits and these were not restored until 2009. He knows that very well. I do not know why all of a sudden he has become a person who is fighting for the rights of veterans. He voted for those changes. He cut services and benefits that veterans truly deserve.

Mr. John Rafferty (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am thankful for this opportunity to speak on this very important motion that will be voted on tonight in the House.

What I hope to do in my short time, before I hand it off to my colleague from St. John's East, is to talk about some things that no one has talked about here today. I have listened to the debate and there are some things that have been said that are counterintuitive and do not make any sense, so I am going to try to make sense of some of them and try to get to the bottom of things.

I first want to talk about the offices closing. Veterans this week came to Ottawa hoping to meet with the Minister of Veterans Affairs about the impending closures. They were joined by some concerned staff and members of PSAC. Unfortunately, they were snubbed by the minister, if I can put it that way. He kept them waiting, failed to show up at the scheduled meeting, and then disrespectfully dismissed their concerns. Those are not my words, but the words of the veterans who came to Ottawa, including Roy Lamore, a Second World War veteran from Thunder Bay. They were rightly upset, which people saw on the news last night, and a number of them have called for his resignation.

The thing that sticks out in my mind and perhaps in many people's minds was indeed Roy Lamore, who has been an activist for veterans for over 70 years in this country. It was he who said "hogwash" just before the minister walked out of the meeting. We are probably going to hear more of that kind of terminology later, as time goes on.

Just before I stood to speak, there was a conversation going on back and forth about the number of veterans. I remind people that

these offices also deal with 25,000 RCMP veterans and their families. That is often forgotten in this discussion. There are 25,000 RCMP veterans and their families. When Conservatives talk about investing \$4.7 billion in Veterans Affairs, consider this: when Ste. Anne's Hospital is transferred and all the other cuts happen, there will be approximately 2,000 people cut from Veterans Affairs.

If we look at the Conservative cuts across all of the departments on a percentage basis, Veterans Affairs has the largest personnel cut of any department and the staff involved will all be gone by 2015, some time in the next year. All of those 2,000 people will be gone. That is the first point. It is a little counterintuitive for the government to say it is increasing service but cutting 2,000 people. How does it rationalize that? It says it is transferring the offices to 620 Service Canada points. I want to say a couple of things about that.

I heard Conservative member after Conservative member today say these people will be trained. We know from the 2012 ombudsman's report that the government does not have a good record of training anyone. I want to talk about that a little later when I talk about mental health. At least 620 people are going to be trained. These are not new positions at Service Canada, but people who are already there. Keep in mind that Service Canada is already understaffed and overworked. If anyone has to go to Service Canada for any help, that person would find that is very readily the case. Some of the people who are already there will supposedly be trained in Veterans Affairs issues. That is one of the things that disturbs veterans, particularly wartime veterans, the most.

• (1345)

In short, the government is going to let go of all the people who already have expertise, the people whom veterans have been dealing with, in some cases for many years, helping them with their issues. It will then train new people who will have Veterans Affairs business on top of all their other business, such as CPP disability, EI and all sorts of other things. To say the service is going to be better, well, it is absolutely impossible that it would get better.

What happens now in a typical Service Canada office? People wait in line for maybe 15 or 20 minutes or half an hour, if they are lucky, and then they will see someone who will say, "Have a seat over there while we wait for someone to be free".

Now we could assume that 620 people are going to be trained by the current government, but in fact they are not going to be trained. So it is going to be a fiasco for those who are 93 years old to make their way to the Service Canada office to get some kind of service. It is a big problem.

Service Canada staff are excellent. Those people work hard and do the best they can, but to add more duties and training onto a job they do not really have or know anything about is going to be very difficult for the veterans.

I have received a couple of emails from constituents asking what exactly the closures mean. They hear the back and forth. They hear from the veterans and the minister, but what does it actually mean?

Business of Supply

Well, this is what it means. One office has already been closed, more are closing, including the office in Thunder Bay. These offices provide critical and specialized services for the Canadian Forces and, as I said before, 25,000 RCMP retired members and their families. These services include assistance with accessing benefits and services, support for mental health services issues, crisis intervention, and helping elderly veterans access services to live independently in a one-on-one environment. It also means that veterans will have to travel to other cities if they want that face-to-face interaction for front-line services, or be forced to try to access service online or by telephone.

Last week I tried the 1-866-522-2122 number. Although I did not get anyone, it seemed as if the message I got was, “Well just hold on and enjoy 40 minutes of flute music and we’ll see if we can get back to you”. It is just not a suitable situation.

Of course, many seniors do not have online services or cannot get access to them. I live 30 minutes from Thunder Bay and I do not have cellphone service or Internet service. I am not exactly sure how seniors across the country will be able to access these services. Of course, it is especially difficult for elderly veterans or those suffering from PTSD.

Veterans will lose that long-term relationship they have, and I think that is one of the things missing from the government’s discussion here. Many of these veterans have built up long-term relationships with staff at regional offices, which is especially important for veterans young and old, wartime and modern veterans who have complex needs, particularly mental needs. To deal with telephones, or to go online, or to travel a long distance simply does not make sense. It would involve travelling long distances to meet people who likely would not have the same training as the people who are there now.

I will give one simple example of the difficulties that people have not talked about.

One of the services that the wartime veterans get is snow removal. What used to happen was that the Veterans Affairs office would help the veteran coordinate the snow removal service, ensuring that someone was hired to remove the snow, making sure they got paid, and so on and so forth. What will happen now is that the veteran will get a cheque at the beginning of the snow season based on last year’s snow.

Last year in Thunder Bay there was hardly any snow, but there is lots of snow this year. So when the veterans run out of money halfway through, can members imagine their phoning or being online with Service Canada saying, “I’ve run out of money for my snow removal”. Is that going to get sorted out? I do not think so. It would get sorted though if Veterans Affairs offices remained open and if there were that face-to-face contact.

It is really disingenuous for the government to say there are fewer and fewer veterans. There are more veterans. There will be almost 6,000 new veterans released from the Canadian Armed Forces in the next year.

I could go on and on. I know members would like me to, but in closing, I would appeal to the minister that at the very least he keep

these offices open until all of these other people, these 620 people or so, are trained.

● (1350)

Mr. Rodger Cuzner (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from Thunder Bay—Rainy River for his intervention. Sitting behind him is the member for Sackville—Eastern Shore, and I know that over our time in the House, he has earned my respect for all the work he has done on behalf of veterans.

Over my 14 years here, I have seen some terrible mistakes made by governments. This one makes absolutely no sense. I am sure my friend will agree.

They continue to say “600 points of service”. There was a letter received by one of my colleagues. The writer said that he and his wife went into Service Canada to renew their passports. The husband was a veteran, and he went over to the attendant and said, “I understand you people are taking over the files for the veterans. What are you going to be able to do to help me should I need that help?”

The person who attended him said, “I am not really sure. I took that training some time ago, but I know I have a 1-800 number here that you can call if you need any help”.

What kind of service is that for the men and women who answered the call of duty for this country? Does my colleague think that is a good level of service for them?

● (1355)

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, of course that is not a good level of service. It is not even close. We are talking about respect and dignity for veterans and their families. That is really the bottom line.

It is unbelievable. The existing employees in Service Canada are already overworked and already have to do too much and cannot keep up with the day-to-day duties, because those numbers have been cut too. Even specialized people who are in the offices right now were not moved to Service Canada. We have maybe one person in a Service Canada outlet who is going to have some sort of training in veterans affairs. I do not know how the Conservatives can even start to claim that this would be an improved level of service.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my hon. colleague for mentioning the 25,000 RCMP retired veterans. We have approximately 700,000 military veterans, RCMP veterans, and independent spouses. The DVA has a client base of just over 200,000, so two-thirds of that base is not even being served now. Many military and RCMP veterans simply do not know the benefits they are possibly able to get.

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

[English]

AGRICULTURE

As my colleague from Cape Breton—Canso said, what type of service does the member think these people who are applying for the first time at a Service Canada office should expect in the near future?

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, my friend brings up a very good point. The numbers fluctuate in Veterans Affairs. There will be 6,000 new veterans coming out in the next couple of years. Younger veterans may not need the services right now. They might need them in five, ten, or fifteen years. They have not even gone to Veterans Affairs for any help, but perhaps they will go to Veterans Affairs for help. The numbers fluctuate.

When the Conservatives say that there are fewer war-time veterans, that is true. They are decreasing every year, and that is a sad and unfortunate fact. The fact of the matter is that there are lots of veterans coming up, in both the RCMP and the armed forces, who will be taking their places as they age.

Hon. Shelly Glover (Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise to ask a question, because I am the granddaughter of three World War II veterans. I stand because I am quite offended by some of the comments being made about the ability of our government to serve these veterans.

I know of many veterans, including my grandmother, who passed away a few years ago, who struggled under a Liberal government to make ends meet. Under the Conservative government, \$4.7 billion has been provided so that we can care for our veterans and give them the dignified lives they deserve. On every single occasion, that member voted against that funding. He voted against disability award funding. He voted against funeral and burial service funding. Today he insults Service Canada members who are going to provide service to our veterans.

I ask that the member explain why he voted against \$4.7 billion to our veterans.

Mr. John Rafferty: Mr. Speaker, I cannot speak for the Liberal government before, as the minister started to chat about.

I think the minister missed the whole point of what I was trying to say. I am not sure if she caught the whole thing. What I was trying to explain to this House is that we are talking about front-line services. We are talking about services that are disappearing for future vets, particularly for wartime veterans.

One of the things that should not be changed for someone who is trying to live independently, someone who is 93 years old and is a World War II vet, is the rules. The services that have always been provided should continue to be provided.

The minister intimated that I was dissing Service Canada staff. Nothing could be further from the truth. Unfortunately, the government has cut Service Canada staff. It is cutting Service Canada staff, then it is going to train one of them in veterans affairs. We have already heard from a Liberal member that the training is not there or is not adequate. Service Canada staff will continue to work as hard as they can with the limited resources the government is giving them.

• (1400)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The time for government orders has expired.

Mr. Leon Benoit (Vegreville—Wainwright, CPC): Mr. Speaker, farmers have demonstrated what they are capable of by producing a huge record crop this year. That should be good news, but right now, it frankly does not look like good news.

Less than a year ago, some wheat sold for over \$9.00 a bushel. Good stuff. However, now farmers are being offered under \$4.00 a bushel for the same quality of wheat. Market forces certainly can explain part of that, but not all of it.

The problem is that we do not have a competitive market when it comes to shipping grain. Farmers are captive shippers who are at the mercy of CN and CP, whichever line runs through their area. They have no choice. I have been told that grain companies are taking of advantage of that by buying grain at fire-sale prices and still selling it at much higher prices into the world market.

The agriculture minister has been doing a lot of work on that and has done a good job. However, it is time for railways to up their game, and it is time for grain companies to complete their sales to allow farmers to get closer to the world price for their hard-earned crops.

* * *

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Niagara region played an important role in the Underground Railroad. Niagara's Freedom Trail was a network of people, like Harriet Tubman, who hid and guided slaves as they fled the United States and went to Canada.

For hundreds of slaves in the 1820s, St. Catharines was the final station on this long journey to freedom. In Welland, a hotel known as The Traveler's House employed approximately 10 escaped slaves as woodcutters. One of these men, Jim Wilson, had escaped from Missouri following the Civil War and had worked his way north by boat, foot, and train for more than a year before he finally crossed the suspension bridge in Niagara Falls and settled in Welland.

On February 11, a partnership between the Welland Museum and the Welland Public Library will see a collection of artifacts and books on the Underground Railroad put on display at the library's main branch. The event will also include a short presentation by the museum and will give participants the opportunity to share their own stories and to discuss the events of this important part of our region's history.

As Black History Month approaches in February, I applaud the work of the Welland Museum and the Welland Public Library in their efforts to bring this history to life.

*Statements by Members***FLORA THIBODEAU**

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise in the House today to honour the life of Flora Thibodeau, who recently passed away at the age of 112. Flora held the distinction of being Canada's oldest natural born citizen and the 17th oldest person in the world.

Born in March 1901, Flora was the mother of seven children and was a widow at a young age. She was also a dedicated teacher for six years before she became the first female bank manager of the local Caisse populaire.

I had the pleasure of knowing Flora personally and witnessed first-hand her passion for life and her fiercely independent nature. She was a pillar of the tight-knit Acadian community of Rogersville, where her door was always open to visitors. She will be greatly missed.

I want to express my deepest sympathies to her family and friends and to all of those who will mourn our great loss.

* * *

SEALING INDUSTRY

Ms. Yvonne Jones (Labrador, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise today wearing seal to support this year's Seal Day on the Hill and the Canadian sealing industry.

The sealing industry is vital to the families who live and work in many northern regions of our country. We are proud global leaders in implementing best practices and ensuring sustainability for the sealing resource. My family has depended on the seal for many generations for food, clothes, and medicine, as have most northern aboriginal families.

Liberals will continue to fight against those who spin misinformation and try to buy people's livelihoods with campaigns that are misguided and false. That is a shameful example to be followed by anyone.

* * *

●(1405)

IRENE ANDERSON

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am proud to pay tribute to a true Canadian pioneer, Irene Anderson.

Irene was born on the family farm at Green Ridge, Manitoba, in 1910. She enjoyed growing up on the farm and loved horses. Irene worked in the general store and in 1937 moved to Pine Falls, Manitoba, to work for Northern Store. There she was courted by a Scottish immigrant, George Anderson, and married him in 1938.

Never to back down from a challenge or adventure, Irene and George transferred with the Hudson's Bay Company to Churchill and then went to Tavani, Northwest Territories until 1942. The Hudson's Bay Company moved them to Baffin Island. They ran the trading post an Pangnirtung until 1947 and then the store at Lake Harbour.

In 1952, with three young kids, Irene and George left the Hudson's Bay Company and bought a store in Inglis, Manitoba. An opportunity arose in Manitoba's beautiful Whiteshell, and they moved to Pointe du Bois in 1960. Irene operated that store for 31

years. She retired at the age of 81 and moved to Winnipeg. Irene treasured her memories and artifacts from her time in the Arctic and loved sharing them with family and friends, including my daughter's class.

We lost a beautiful piece of Canadiana on December 27, when Irene passed away at the age of 103. I thank Grandma for being such an inspiration.

* * *

[Translation]

GILBERT BOULANGER

Mr. Pierre-Luc Dusseault (Sherbrooke, NDP): Mr. Speaker, today, I want to pay tribute to Gilbert Boulanger, a Second World War veteran who just passed away at the age of 91. He was nicknamed "l'Alouette", after his squadron.

During the Second World War, he was a gunner because he did not know how to fly the plane. He participated in 37 bombing missions, including two on the day of the Normandy invasion. After the war, he achieved his dream of becoming a pilot and devoted his life to his passion for aviation.

However, Gilbert Boulanger's pet cause was to promote the remembrance of veterans among Quebeckers and Canadians. He always considered himself to be the spokesman for his comrades in arms, who were far too often forgotten. He received a number of distinctions and decorations, including the Distinguished Flying Cross, the 1939-45 Star and the Air Crew Europe Star. He was a pacifist at heart and once said, "I went to war, but I am not a warrior. We won the war, but we still have not won peace".

The "Alouette affolée", or crazy bird, took his last flight on December 31, 2013. Let us celebrate this extraordinary man and his contribution to the duty of remembrance that should inhabit us all.

* * *

[English]

WINTER OLYMPIC GAMES

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to congratulate the two local skaters who will be competing in the pairs program next month in the Sochi Winter Olympics. Rudi Swiegers and Paige Lawrence have been skating together since 2005, and I am proud to say that they train in Virden, Manitoba, under their experienced coach, Mrs. Patti Hole. In fact, the town of Virden gathered on Tuesday evening to wish them all the best in their Olympic experience.

Just recently, Patti Hole said that it was a huge feat for small-town athletes, proving that they don't need to move to bigger cities to get to the world's largest stage. She also said that we have given hope to small-town kids that live out in the middle of nowhere that anything is possible.

Patti is right. From hockey players to curlers, figure skaters, and even skeleton racers, our Olympic athletes from rural Canada continue to shine on the world stage, as exemplified here by the accomplishments of Rudi and Paige.

I know all members of this House will be cheering them on in Sochi. Go, Canada, go.

* * *

HEALTH AWARD

Mr. Jay Aspin (Nipissing—Timiskaming, CPC): Mr. Speaker, every day, countless Canadians accomplish exceptional feats for their communities and for their country. Dr. Aroha Page, a national health care leader in my riding, is no exception.

Earlier this month, I was proud to recognize her with the national Nursing Faculty e-Health Award, sponsored by the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing and Canada Health Infoway.

Dr. Page is a world leader in health care projects. She has been working with 91 Canadian universities and colleges to implement a new digital health curriculum. This will be the first time digital health is introduced to Canada's health curriculum, to ensure that Canadians have the best care and treatment. It is the passion, leadership, and hard work of people like Dr. Page that strengthen our communities and help make Canada the great place it is.

Colleagues in the House, please join me in recognizing Dr. Page and, indeed, all of the unsung leaders across Canada who dedicate themselves and their work to their neighbours, community, and country.

* * *

[Translation]

CITY OF JOLIETTE

Ms. Francine Raynault (Joliette, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on Sunday, I attended a commemorative mass at the cathedral in Joliette in celebration of the 150th anniversary of this wonderful community. We were once again treated to the polished sounds of Joliette's Choeur du Musée d'art, a 40-member choir directed by Philippe Bourque.

Joliette is located in the heart of the Lanaudière region and is a veritable gateway to culture in the region: it is home to an art museum, a renowned classical music festival and a trailblazing CEGEP, and it is the cradle of traditional music. The list goes on, but what I love most about Joliette is its people. They are hard-working and open. They are concerned about the environment and they support one another.

Today, and every day, I am proud to be from Joliette. I am sure that the House will join me in simply saying, happy anniversary, Joliette.

* * *

● (1410)

[English]

LUNAR NEW YEAR

Mr. Chungsen Leung (Willowdale, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is the last day of the Year of the Snake in the lunar calendar. Tomorrow, we welcome the Year of the Horse.

The lunar new year has become one of the most widely celebrated holidays in Canada, as millions of Canadians, including those of

Statements by Members

Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean heritage, gather with family and friends to ring in the new year this evening. Many communities will put on events featuring lion and dragon dances, giving out red envelopes of lucky money, and enjoying multi-course meals. I encourage all Canadians to participate in these festivities and share in the diversity of our multicultural communities.

According to the Chinese zodiac, each one of the 12 years is dedicated to a specific animal and this year, it is the Year of the Horse. People born in the Year of the Horse are said to be energetic, active, hardworking, and elegant.

On behalf of the government, I wish all Canadians a happy, healthy, and prosperous Year of the Horse.

[Member spoke in Mandarin as follows:]

Xin nian kuai le.

[Member spoke in Cantonese as follows:]

Sun nien fai lok.

* * *

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Jasbir Sandhu (Surrey North, NDP): Mr. Speaker, looking back at the past year, it is clear to my community of Surrey that the government has ignored our needs.

In 2013, there were 25 murders in Surrey, the highest number in many years. Our officers were promised federal resources to protect our neighbourhoods, yet the cost of the new B.C. RCMP headquarters was thrust upon the communities. Unfortunately, the buck does not stop there.

The Conservatives have also dodged their responsibilities regarding infrastructure development in our communities. Surrey's transportation network is inadequate. The Skytrain only serves part of the city, and many of our roads and bridges are in desperate need of attention, including the 75-year-old Pattullo Bridge.

Municipalities only receive 8% of the tax revenue, yet they are responsible for 60% of infrastructure development. Cities cannot handle these financial burdens.

It is obvious that the government has not kept its resolution and is not committed to the priorities of Canadians. Let us hope 2014 shows better results.

* * *

[Translation]

ALZHEIMER AWARENESS MONTH

Ms. Eve Adams (Mississauga—Brampton South, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to inform the House and Canadians that January is Alzheimer Awareness Month.

My father suffered from Alzheimer's toward the end of his life. That is why I am proud that our government is taking meaningful action to support Canadians living with this disease. For example, since 2006, it has invested more than \$860 million in neuroscience research.

*Statements by Members**[English]*

This includes \$100 million in research funded through the Brain Cancer Foundation and \$182 million funded through the Canadian Institutes for Health Research, to support Alzheimer's-related projects across our country.

Last month, our great Minister of Health participated in the G8 dementia summit in the U.K. Our government is taking a leadership role on this issue. We are committed to funding world-class research and raising awareness to assist all Canadians living with this terrible disease.

* * *

LUNAR NEW YEAR

Ms. Joyce Murray (Vancouver Quadra, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, tonight marks the beginning of the Lunar New Year. It is a time when families gather to celebrate, to give thanks for good fortune, and to hope for a prosperous new year.

In my riding of Vancouver Quadra, celebrations kicked off last Saturday at the University of British Columbia, with the University Neighbourhoods Association's Lunar New Year celebration. This was a wonderful event featuring singers, dancers, and athletes from the community. People had a great time, and I was delighted to be part of it.

Tonight is Lunar New Year's Eve. Together with Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, we will count down the new year later tonight with a celebration in Richmond, B.C., with fireworks and the banging of pots and pans to scare away the beast called Nian that comes at the new year. To celebrate, there will be drums, gongs, and lion dances. Children will dress in their finest new clothes to honour their elders, and they will receive hong bao, lucky money, in return.

I wish our Asian friends, and all Canadians, a happy, prosperous, and healthy Lunar New Year.

● (1415)

The Speaker: I would remind the hon. member for Vancouver Quadra that she should refer to our colleagues by their ridings or titles not by their proper names.

The hon. member for Yukon.

* * *

SEAL DAY ON THE HILL

Mr. Ryan Leef (Yukon, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is Seal Day on the Hill, and I invite all parliamentarians to join us in the Speaker's dining room at 3:30 p.m. today to sample some meat and enjoy a seal-product fashion show.

I am proud to reaffirm that our government will continue to defend the seal hunt as an important source of food and income for coastal and Inuit communities.

Sealing plays a vital role in the lives of tens of thousands of Canadians, and Canada remains steadfast in its position that the seal harvest is humane, sustainable, and a well-regulated activity. We will continue to advance that position while fighting the European Union and the seal ban with the World Trade Organization. We will continue to stand behind the sealing industry, to ensure that our

traditional industries remain a strong and sustainable part of our rural and northern communities.

I encourage all parliamentarians to show their support for the seal industry at today's events.

* * *

*[Translation]***VETERANS**

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, we knew that the Conservatives could be heartless, but we never would have thought that they would stoop so low in their treatment of veterans.

Veterans have a simple request: do not close service centres. These brave men and women, who put their lives in danger for our country, are not asking for the moon. They are simply asking to be treated with respect and to have access to decent services.

What was the Minister of Veterans Affairs' response to this? He put on a real show of poor taste and bad manners. He showed up an hour late to the meeting and insulted those who dared make demands. Then he showed up here with his crocodile tears over his lateness, hoping everyone would forget. Veterans have not forgotten. They are still angry with the minister, and his anti-union diatribe will not change anything.

I remind members that this is the same minister who said that the problem with Haiti was that there was too much garbage in the streets, and this is the same prime minister who decided that it would be a good idea to have this genius in charge of our veterans.

Our veterans deserve better, better than this minister's insults and lack of respect.

* * *

*[English]***CANAL CLASSIC**

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): Mr. Speaker,

MPs took to the ice and were surprised at the friends they were keeping.

There were MPs from all parties joining together in full force,

To take on members of the media party, of course.

Thanks to Canadian Tire for the chance to take part,

It was to help less advantaged kids, Canadian Tire Jump Start.

It was MPs from all parties who took to the ice,

One person did say, "That MP from Ottawa Centre is actually nice".

The NDP's best was a former soldier, who on the ice did sail,

It was to no one's surprise that NDP player was female.

Our captain from Barrie did lead us. "He is really good", cheered one young lass.

The Minister of Justice did say, "Yeah, sure, but we just wish he would pass".

It was the media's enforcer, CBC's Solomon, who did cross check from behind,

From the ice I could hear Evan say, "I want to confirm, the CBC is really not kind".

It was Senator Munson who looked unsure as if in a dream,

It was then he said, "I am not sure who to play for, because yesterday my leader kicked me off the team".

At game's end our hero rose, his hands in the air, as he fired the puck into the netty.

That shoot-out goal will be remembered forever as a Pacetti.

ORAL QUESTIONS

[Translation]

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, will the Prime Minister support the New Democratic Party motion to keep veterans' service centres open?

[English]

Failing the personal vote of the Prime Minister, will he at least allow his members of Parliament a free vote as to whether or not we should keep open the service centres for our brave veterans?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Veterans Affairs Canada is constantly looking for ways to improve service delivery to our members, to the vets who need those services. All veterans requiring personal support will continue to be visited by their case managers at their home, and as well we have some 650 service points for veterans in Service Canada offices throughout the land.

• (1420)

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, does the Prime Minister realize that from Corner Brook, one of the offices being closed, to St. John's is an eight-hour drive in good weather, that it is not true that there will be home visits for all these veterans, and that it is grossly unacceptable to be shutting down services to our veterans when we have lost eight of them to suicide in the last two months?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we all are very deeply saddened by the suicides, but I think it is patently unfair to connect those unfortunate circumstances to the office closures.

We do intend to keep on working on these issues to ensure that, whether veterans need immediate service and to be visited by a caseworker, that continues, along with their opportunity to access a local service centre office very, very close by, where veterans' issues will be dealt with at that point.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, he said “very, very close by”; a 16-hour return trip.

Veterans in Sydney, Nova Scotia, are holding sit-ins to try to stop the Prime Minister's decision to shut down these offices. One veteran even said: “We're fighting a war here”. Veterans saying that they feel they are fighting a war with their own government; how did Conservatives let it come to this?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, this is fearmongering at the height of all this rhetoric. The reality is that in the past veterans in need of home care have been served there and will continue to be, at their own homes or elsewhere, their choice.

As far as having to travel for regular, ordinary services, that service will be provided in some 650 locations, some of them right in the very building where the office was that is now being closed.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): Mr. Speaker, that is the minister who said not to point fingers at him. It is not a question of fearmongering; it is a question of listening to

Oral Questions

Canada's veterans. It is the veterans who are speaking; it is not fearmongering.

The Prime Minister has repeated time and again this week that “very few” veterans are using these services. If that is indeed the case, why will the Prime Minister not accept to at least meet with those very few veterans to hear their stories?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, at least I know who I am. I have been committed to having an open dialogue with the men and women who serve Canada in uniform, and we have made significant advancements in how veterans are served—

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Speaker: Order. The hon. Minister of Veterans Affairs has the floor.

Hon. Julian Fantino: Mr. Speaker, veterans across Canada should know that I am deeply committed, as is our government, to meeting with them and listening to their issues no matter where and when that occurs. I have always reached out to veterans and I will continue doing so.

Hon. Thomas Mulcair (Leader of the Opposition, NDP): They felt all the love this week, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

While the Conservatives are closing veterans' service centres, we also learned that the Department of National Defence is under administrative supervision. Perhaps if they were the slightest bit capable of managing public money, they would not have to cut services to our veterans.

[English]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I have to reiterate the fact that we remain committed not only to working with groups across the land but also to working closely with the Department of National Defence to ensure that we have a coordinated approach and are delivering the kinds of services that either our serving members or those who are veterans will receive. That is typical of what we have been doing and will be continuing to do.

* * *

• (1425)

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT

Hon. Stéphane Dion (Saint-Laurent—Cartierville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, under the Liberals, from 1993 to 2005, unemployment in Canada dropped by 29%.

Under the Conservatives, from 2006 to 2013, unemployment rose by 21%. Under the Conservatives, no less than 14 OECD countries have curbed unemployment better than Canada.

Oral Questions

How does the Conservative government explain its mediocre record, both in relation to the performance of other developed nations and compared to Canadian performance under the Liberals? [English]

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, in fact, we have the best economic record and employment record of all G7 countries.

Our government is focused on what matters to Canadians, which is jobs and economic growth. Even though the global economy remains fragile, especially in the U.S. and Europe, our economic policies have helped protect Canada. Over one million net new jobs have been created since July 2009; 80% of those are in the private sector. Both the IMF and the OECD forecast Canada to be among the fastest growing G7 economies in the years ahead.

With a fragile global economy, we must stay the course with a low tax plan to create jobs—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Kings—Hants.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, for Canada, 2013 was a write-off for jobs, growth, and prosperity. Of Canada's net new jobs, 80% were part time. There were only 19,000 net new full-time jobs for the whole country. Under the Conservatives, the number of jobless Canadians has grown by 21%. In terms of growth, the U.S. and U.K. economies are growing faster than Canada's.

Will the upcoming budget finally include a real plan for jobs, growth, and prosperity?

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know where the member of the opposition is getting his facts, because the facts are that 80% of those new jobs were in the private sector and 85% were full time. Over one million net new jobs were created, over 85% of which were full-time jobs.

It is rich for the Liberals to be criticizing our government on our job creation record. They voted against every single job creation strategy our government has put forward, including freezing EI rates, providing certainty and flexibility to workers and employers, tax cuts for manufacturers to purchase new equipment and expand their operations, \$70 billion in stable and predictable job—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Kings—Hants.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, we lost 46,000 jobs in December alone. Young Canadians have lost 264,000 jobs since before the downturn.

When it comes to prosperity, Canadian households are struggling under record levels of personal debt.

The Minister of Finance has added \$158 billion to the federal debt. That means that the average Canadian family will have to pay over \$18,000 more in future taxes just to pay for the Conservative debt.

How can the Conservatives boast, when 2013 saw no jobs, no growth, and more debt than prosperity?

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we are delivering historic relief, leaving more money in Canadians' pockets, where it belongs. Total

savings for the typical family are nearly \$3,400 every year. We have cut taxes in every way the government collects them, cutting over 160 taxes. We increased the amount Canadians earn tax free. We introduced pension income splitting. We reduced the GST from 7% to 5%. We introduced important tax credits, including the Canada employment credit, the working income tax benefit, and the child tax credit.

It is a record we are proud of.

* * *

ETHICS

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in question period, the Prime Minister keeps insisting that Senator Irving Gerstein is not under investigation by the RCMP, but Mr. Gerstein's name comes up repeatedly in court documents. He played a role in the payoff, and the RCMP has never said that he is not a part of its investigation.

Can the Prime Minister share with Canadians how he knows that Senator Gerstein is not under investigation?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the documents submitted by the RCMP quite clearly indicate who is under investigation, and that is Senator Duffy and Nigel Wright.

● (1430)

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday, when asked about Mr. van Hemmen, the Prime Minister replied:

...it is a long-standing government policy...to provide legal assistance to such individuals.

However, these fees were related to the RCMP investigation into Nigel Wright and Mike Duffy. Why are the taxpayers being left on the hook to defend PMO staff from the RCMP investigation into Conservative corruption?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the Prime Minister stated the other day, it is a long-standing government policy that predates our government where ministers of the crown and their staff do have access to legal assistance with respect to the activities they undertake as part of the government function.

Ms. Megan Leslie (Halifax, NDP): Mr. Speaker, when the news broke first through Nigel Wright and then through the RCMP that many people in the PMO were involved, did the Prime Minister confront his staff and demand answers as to why they had misled him?

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, quite clearly in these documents it states the leadership that the Prime Minister did show.

Oral Questions

He went into his office immediately and insisted that his office assist the RCMP in its investigation. Staff has, of course, provided all necessary waivers to assist the RCMP. Thousands of emails were turned over.

That is the type of leadership I think most Canadians have come to depend on from this Prime Minister, and it is the type of leadership we will continue to provide Canadians.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, let us get back to the issue of how the Senate scandal was managed, and more specifically to David van Hemmen.

Can the Prime Minister or his parliamentary secretary confirm that Nigel Wright's former executive assistant had absolutely no knowledge of the agreement to pay back Mike Duffy's illegal expense claims, either through the party or his boss, who was none other than the Prime Minister's chief of staff?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the actions of Senator Duffy and Nigel Wright are being investigated by the RCMP, and we will let it continue its investigation.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Ève Pécelet (La Pointe-de-l'Île, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the Conservatives really need to stop taking Canadians for fools.

David van Hemmen, Nigel Wright's former executive assistant, was defended by the law firm Carroll & Wallace in the Senate expense scandal. He was tossed out of the Prime Minister's Office in August 2013, but is now serving as a policy advisor in the office of the Minister of State for Finance.

Exactly why did the Privy Council Office hire the law firm Carroll & Wallace to defend Mr. van Hemmen between May 13 and August 30, 2013?

[*English*]

Mr. Paul Calandra (Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister and for Intergovernmental Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as I just said to an earlier question, ministers of the crown and their staff do have access to legal assistance for the things they undertake in their role as staff or as ministers. This is a policy that predates our government. It is a long-standing policy.

I can appreciate that the member might not have had a chance to read or acquaint herself with that, since the NDP has lost 16 straight elections and has never served in government.

* * *

[*Translation*]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, yesterday we learned that the Treasury Board was brought in to take over supervising the Department of National Defence.

Only one in five projects has come in on time and on budget. The only thing they can do without going over budget is buy paper and

paper clips. For everything else, they need someone else to be in charge.

If the department cannot manage the budgets for 80% of its projects, how can it be expected to keep its promises about shipbuilding and materiel for our troops?

[*English*]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member is completely offside with this in terms of what actually happens.

As a matter of fact, under this government there has been an unprecedented investment in the Canadian armed forces and national defence of this country.

While I am on my feet, over \$100 million more has been put into health care expenditures. I am very proud of that, and they should be as well.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, on issues like the F-35 and numerous others, the previous Minister of National Defence oversaw some of the most incompetent and out-of-control military procurements in our Canadian history. Things were so out of hand that the President of the Treasury Board was brought in to take over supervising the department's operations. The minister responsible for gazebos and glow sticks is now supposed to solve the problems at Defence.

Can the defence minister tell us how long he expects his department to be under another minister's control?

• (1435)

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am very proud of the work that has been done by National Defence, and I am very proud to be a part of a government that has made this a priority. Indeed, this is something that should have the complete support of the hon. member.

* * *

[*Translation*]

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. Sylvain Chicoine (Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, NDP): Mr. Speaker, day by day, the Minister of Veterans Affairs reveals a little more of his total incompetence. After treating a group of veterans disrespectfully, he is veering into conspiracy theories. He is trying to blame the unions for veterans' anger about service cuts.

This is not about whether unions oppose closing service centres; this is about veterans demanding the services they are entitled to.

Will the minister address veterans' concerns instead of pushing his anti-union agenda?

[*English*]

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, there is a big difference between union bashing and speaking the truth, and I have proof that I am speaking the truth.

Oral Questions

In any event, the union has engaged in fearmongering and put out some false messages attributed to an employee of Veterans Affairs Canada, totally framing her. It put out messages that clearly created fearmongering among the veterans community. If that is not mischief-making, I do not know what is.

Mr. Peter Stoffer (Sackville—Eastern Shore, NDP): Mr. Speaker, if PSAC is standing up for veterans, then God love the union movement.

My question is very clear. Mr. Roy Lamore, a World War II veteran from Thunder Bay, said that people dealing with DVA on the phone, the 1-866-522-2122 number, should be prepared to bring their lunch. Is this what the Minister of Veterans Affairs means by enhanced services?

It is not too late for the minister to do the right thing. Will he now stand in his place and reverse the decision to cut the further eight bases across Canada?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to be clear, the available Service Canada locations with trained Service Canada staff in the locations where we are closing offices are Charlottetown, zero kilometres; Sydney, zero kilometres; Corner Brook, zero kilometres; Windsor, one kilometre; Thunder Bay, four kilometres; Saskatoon, zero kilometres; and Brandon, Manitoba, zero kilometres. That is service that is handy to the veterans and—

The Speaker: The hon. member for Saint-Maurice—Champlain.

* * *

[Translation]

EMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Ms. Lise St-Denis (Saint-Maurice—Champlain, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, the latest available socio-economic data for Mauricie show that the population is aging at an increasing rate and that there are chronic economic difficulties. In addition, recent changes to the employment insurance regime for seasonal workers are forcing young people to leave their region. Has the government taken steps to compensate for the regulatory inconsistencies that threaten these so-called seasonal jobs?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member is absolutely wrong.

The changes we have made to the employment insurance program simply encourage unemployed workers to actively seek jobs available in their communities. Nobody will have to leave their community and go elsewhere if there are no jobs available. Employment insurance is still there; nothing has changed in that regard.

[English]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, government policy should enhance job growth and improve income. However, in the P.E.I. seasonal economy EI is having the opposite impact. Take a farmer's seasonal employee for example, who is needed only a day and a half a week at this time of year and paid \$16 an hour. After deductions and the EI clawback of 50¢ on every dollar, the employee is left with less than \$6 an hour. The employee is poorer and the farmer has trouble attracting employees. It is starting an underground

economy. Will the minister stop inflicting this economic hardship and reconsider the policy?

• (1440)

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unlike the member for Malpeque, we understand that dynamic economic growth and high standards of living are not created by employment insurance. It should be there to support people who cannot find jobs in their local area. That is precisely why we have made changes to encourage people to actively search for work in their communities. If it is not available, of course they can receive EI.

What we will not do is adopt the Liberal policy of a 45-day work year, which would impose a multi-billion-dollar increase in job-killing EI premiums. That is irresponsible.

* * *

[Translation]

NATIONAL DEFENCE

Hon. Dominic LeBlanc (Beauséjour, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, this government's military procurement process is completely broken.

We are now at the point where the Department of National Defence is being overseen by the Treasury Board. As a result, there are more delays, higher prices, more waste and job losses under the Conservatives.

How did we get to the point where this government, which claims to be a good financial manager and to want to equip our soldiers, is incapable of either?

[English]

Hon. Rob Nicholson (Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member may not be aware that all government expenditures go through the Treasury Board. I do not know what it was when he was in government, but I can tell him that unlike when he and his colleagues were in government—

Hon. Gary Goodyear: None went through the Treasury Board.

Hon. Rob Nicholson: Maybe nothing went through Treasury Board because it was never a priority with them, so I guess I can understand that part. But it is a priority for our government to support our men and women in uniform.

*Oral Questions***VETERANS AFFAIRS**

Mr. Brian Masse (Windsor West, NDP): Mr. Speaker, in my community people are outraged at the minister's disrespect for veterans and his insistence to close our local veterans office. These closures are going to hurt veterans in Windsor and Essex County, plain and simple. The people who fought to defend Canada should not have to fight again for the services they earned when they came home. Will the minister apologize to veterans in Essex County and Windsor and keep our office open? What will it take for him to do the right thing?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, to the citizens and veterans of Essex County, they can find services at the Service Canada locations where Veterans Affairs Canada employees are present: in Windsor, Amherstburg, Belle River, Leamington, Tilbury, Wallaceburg, Chatham, Sarnia, Petrolia, and of course from zero distance to the local office right in Windsor.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, unlike the member opposite, New Democrats are working for veterans. These offices provide critical, specialized front-line services for our veterans. They cannot be replaced by a 1-800 number, or a computer. The Conservative cuts mean that even more veterans will be relying on the London office, which will have fewer staff to serve them. Will the minister do the right thing, the honourable thing, and stop the closure of these offices?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I do not know how many times one has to repeat the message. The services that are being provided to veterans are enhanced, to the tune of some 600-plus service points across the country. As for London, Ontario, there are local services that will be available through the service centre office.

Not every veteran needs to go to these offices. If they are in need of services and cannot travel, we will travel there. We do not make them travel. We have been doing that all along and will continue doing that.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Lysane Blanchette-Lamothe (Pierrefonds—Dollard, NDP): Mr. Speaker, while the Conservatives are closing veterans' service centres, they are spending \$4 million a year on ministers' offices all over the country.

Instead of investing in direct public services, the Conservatives are investing in services for Conservative ministers.

How can the Conservatives justify that the budget for ministers' satellite offices has doubled, when they are making cuts everywhere else in the departments?

[*English*]

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, CPC): Mr. Speaker, unlike the previous government, we believe that all Canadians should have reasonable access to government ministers' offices. That is why, in 2010, we expanded and launched offices in the Northwest Territories, in fact three offices in the far north. That is because, unlike the opposition, we believe that all Canadians should have access to government services right across this great country.

● (1445)

Mr. Charlie Angus (Timmins—James Bay, NDP): Mr. Speaker, clearly the Conservatives believe that all their ministers should have access to perks.

Last year, to help their travelling ministers, the Conservatives spent \$264,000 on an office in St. John's, \$821,000 in Yellowknife, \$187,000 in Whitehorse, and a shocking \$589,965 on an office in Fredericton. They already have offices here and they have huge bureaucracies at their fingertips. Their sense of entitlement knows no bounds.

Why are these ministers helping themselves while telling veterans and seniors that the cupboard is bare?

Hon. Diane Finley (Minister of Public Works and Government Services, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the opposition members have been clamouring for more services for Canadians and more convenience, and that is what we are offering. However, we are ensuring, unlike the previous government, that the access is available to Canadians right across this country. That is why we invested in regional offices for the ministers in the far north and indeed in other parts of Canada, so that all Canadians would have access to ministers' offices wherever they are in this great country.

* * *

NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. Rick Norlock (Northumberland—Quinte West, CPC): Mr. Speaker, families in eastern and northern Ontario are worried about the availability and high prices of propane. This winter has been especially difficult on residents who rely on propane to heat their homes. While some provinces regulate the pricing of propane, Ontario does not.

Can the Minister of Natural Resources update this House on the action our government is taking to ensure families are not left out in the cold?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I understand how important this issue is to families who rely on affordable propane to heat their homes. This is especially true, since Ontario families have already been hit by higher energy prices. It is within the jurisdiction of the Government of Ontario to regulate the distribution and pricing of propane.

Our government cares about fairness for homeowners, so we will be asking the National Energy Board and the Competition Bureau to review propane market issues, including high prices and scarcity.

* * *

[*Translation*]

EMPLOYMENT

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadian families are struggling. In December alone, 67,000 more Canadians became unemployed because of this government's inaction. Despite that, it looks like there will be nothing very concrete in this budget. This is outrageous, because we know that 1.4 million Canadians are unemployed. Why is the government refusing to help Canadians find employment?

*Oral Questions**[English]*

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am not sure why the opposition members are so concerned about what is in the budget; history has proven that they are going to vote against it anyway. All they want to do is engage in reckless spending and impose higher taxes on Canadians.

Our Conservative government is focused on what matters to Canadians: helping create jobs and supporting economic growth. That is why economic action plan 2014 will help grow Canada's economy and create jobs, while keeping taxes low and returning to balanced budgets.

Ms. Peggy Nash (Parkdale—High Park, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is lots of boasting but there is nothing to vote for: the highest unemployment and lowest job creation since the great recession. They are not doing enough.

Times are tough for all Canadians, but our youth who are trying to get a start in life are being hit hardest of all. Over 21,000 full-time youth jobs disappeared in December. Youth unemployment is double the national average. Will the government help young Canadians? Will it help them get back to work by adopting the NDP's youth tax hiring credit?

Hon. Jason Kenney (Minister of Employment and Social Development and Minister for Multiculturalism, CPC): Mr. Speaker, we will absolutely not adopt the disastrous economic policies of the NDP, which would put hundreds of thousands of Canadians out of work by raising taxes on just about everything.

Their EI policy and their 45-day work year would impose multi-billion dollar, job-killing payroll taxes on EI premiums. The New Democrats want to raise job-killing CPP payroll taxes, and they were opposed to our GST cut.

We will continue to lead the developed world in job growth and economic growth, and we will continue to oppose the job-killing, high-tax, fiscally irresponsible policies of the NDP.

* * *

● (1450)

CONSUMER PROTECTION

Mr. Glenn Thibeault (Sudbury, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the minister seems to confuse tax credits and tax cuts, but maybe he knows who he is.

Canadians are struggling to make ends meet. While the Conservative government ignores them, they are forced to rely on credit cards to help pay the bills, cover emergency expenses, and put food on the table.

On average, Canadians carry a \$3,500 balance on a credit card each month, but the Conservatives have allowed banks to charge excessive interest rates, some as high as a whopping 29.9%. Canadians deserve better.

When are the Conservatives going to stop the gouging and protect Canadian consumers?

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Canadian consumers deserve access

to credit on fair and transparent terms. That is why we have taken action to protect Canadians using credit cards by banning unsolicited credit card cheques, requiring simple and clear information that provides timely advance notice of rates and fee changes, limiting anti-consumer business practices, and ensuring prepaid cards never expire.

Our Conservative government believes that with better information, Canadian consumers can make informed decisions in their best interests.

[Translation]

Ms. Annick Papillon (Québec, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Canadians are going deeper and deeper into debt, and they are being gouged by excessive credit card interest rates. In the meantime, the banks collected more than \$30 billion last year. By refusing to crack down on the banks, the Minister of Finance is choosing to defend the banks' interests over consumers' interests, even though the Conservatives claim to stand up for consumers. What tangible things will the Conservatives do to reduce credit card interest rates?

[English]

Mr. Andrew Saxton (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Finance, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the socialist NDP may not understand how the economy works. I know they hate business and would like to tax business out of the country, but we need strong businesses in Canada and we need strong banks. Strong businesses employ Canadians and pay billions in taxes, which is revenue we need to pay for health care and other social services that Canadians depend on.

* * *

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Hon. Lawrence MacAulay (Cardigan, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, veterans caseworker Michelle Bradley stated "You walk away from the office every day feeling defeated and ashamed because you cannot help the veteran, which is now my job to do".

Yesterday I spoke with Stephen Cruickshank, a veteran who was basically told that the only thing they could offer him was a 1-800 number. He feels the government's changes are a slap in the face to all those who have served.

Will the government reverse these devastating closures to veterans' services offices across this country and fix this disgrace?

Hon. Julian Fantino (Minister of Veterans Affairs, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is not a disgrace at all. This is the right thing to do to ensure that our veterans and their families are properly served.

I just illustrated the fact that veterans in the areas where the offices are being closed will have to travel practically zero distance, and if they cannot travel, we will continue to visit them at their homes or whatever place of their choosing, as we have been doing and will continue to do.

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CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Hon. John McCallum (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, processing times for visitor visas have tripled since the Conservative government came to power. That means red tape instead of little red envelopes at this time of Chinese New Year.

New Year is a time for family, yet our outdated bureaucratic visa system means that many families will not get to see their relatives during this holiday season.

Will the minister commit to fix this broken system?

Hon. Chris Alexander (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the system was broken and outdated when we came into office in 2006. We have done a huge amount to make it better and faster by slashing backlogs by over 50% and reuniting families, parents, and grandparents for holidays and all around the year. Just last year we welcomed well over one million visitors to Canada, 30% to 40% more than in the last full year of the Liberal government.

We are committed to getting those processing times down and to bringing business people, tourists, and students to Canada in record numbers, and we are getting that job done.

* * *

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Mr. Speaker, it is well known that neonicotinoids have a harmful impact on bees. Even a small dose of this pesticide can reduce the amount of pollen collected by over 50%. Canadians are truly concerned.

Bee health has a serious impact on our economy and our environment. The European Union restricted the use of this pesticide last year. When will the Conservative government take action on this harmful pesticide?

• (1455)

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question. He knows that we are committed to the health and safety of Canadians. Health Canada makes its decisions on pesticide risks based on science and applies strict standards to protect the health of Canadians and their environment.

Over 200 types of scientific studies must be submitted before a pesticide is approved, and the department continuously monitors the most recent science. We are doing it on this as well, to ensure that actions taken are as needed.

[Translation]

Ms. Ruth Ellen Brosseau (Berthier—Maskinongé, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the scientific community unanimously agrees that this pesticide affects pollination and bee health.

Oral Questions

By putting bees at risk, we are putting our entire ecosystem at risk. This is not the first time we have broached this subject, but the Conservatives continue to ignore the problem. The European Union has imposed a moratorium.

In addition to the Pest Management Regulatory Agency study, what else will the federal government do to protect bees?

[English]

Hon. Rona Ambrose (Minister of Health, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the member knows that we do take this issue very seriously. When concerns about this issue were identified, the department, along with its international partners, re-evaluated these insecticides. Using the best science available, the department has proposed new rules for the 2014 growing season to better protect bee populations.

Health Canada will continue to review new scientific information as it becomes available and will take action as needed to further protect the bee population.

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SEALING INDUSTRY

Mrs. Tilly O'Neill Gordon (Miramichi, CPC): Mr. Speaker, today is Seal Day on the Hill. The sealing industry plays a crucial role in the economies and the cultures of Inuit and Canadian coastal communities. The European Union's decision to ban seal imports is based on misplaced emotion, not on science or fact.

Canadians stand behind our government's decision to appeal the WTO ruling. In fact, a poll today showed that the clear majority of Canadians support the seal hunt.

Will the minister tell us what our government is doing to protect sealers?

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, 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 question. The European Union ban on seal has had a devastating impact on northerners and coastal communities. Sealing is a part of our heritage and our livelihood.

I am proud to restate our government's support for sealers. That is why our government submitted its appeal this month to the WTO on its ruling to uphold the ban. It is encouraging to see that the majority of Canadians support our approach to defend Canadian sealers. I just wish that the NDP and Liberals would get on side.

*Oral Questions***INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION**

Ms. Kirsty Duncan (Etobicoke North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, a new transitional government has taken power in the Central African Republic with the hopes of ending the brutal violence plaguing the country. The UN lists the Central African Republic as one of its top three global humanitarian emergencies. Half of the population is in need of humanitarian aid.

It is clear that \$5 million is not enough to tackle this conflict. What is the government doing to reduce the risk to civilians and aid the international efforts?

[*Translation*]

Hon. Christian Paradis (Minister of International Development and Minister for La Francophonie, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is true that the Central African Republic is in the midst of a serious crisis, which unfortunately is deemed to be a forgotten crisis. However, I can confirm that Canada is there.

As recently as December 2013, my colleague, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced that the Government of Canada would give \$5 million in aid to the Central African Republic, in addition to amounts previously announced. Therefore, more than \$6.9 million in aid was announced by our government in 2013. We continue to monitor the situation very closely.

* * *

[*English*]

THE ENVIRONMENT

Ms. Linda Duncan (Edmonton—Strathcona, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Saskatchewan community pastures delivered a model partnership for over 80 years, sustaining small ranches and critical habitat for threatened species. Incredibly, the Conservative government responded by shutting them down. Farmers, conservationists, ranches, and communities are demanding the government act to save the key pastures.

Will the Minister of the Environment commit today to intervene and establish a national wildlife area as a model for sustainable farming and wildlife protection?

• (1500)

Hon. Leona Aglukkaq (Minister of the Environment, Minister of the Canadian Northern Economic Development Agency and Minister for the Arctic Council, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is committed to protecting our environment. That is why our government announced that we will be unveiling a new national conservation plan.

Since we formed government, we have created two national marine conservation areas, three marine protected areas, three national wildlife areas, two national parks, and one national historic site. The total area of the land that we have protected is twice the size of Vancouver Island.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government supports job creation and economic growth from natural resources development. We focus on what matters to Canadian families. We understand that economic development must be balanced with environmental protection.

Would the Minister of Natural Resources update the House on what our government is doing to hold companies to account in the case of an accident?

Hon. Joe Oliver (Minister of Natural Resources, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government is absolutely focused on the responsible development of our natural resources. That is why today I had the pleasure of tabling the energy safety and security act, which will significantly increase environmental protection for the offshore and the nuclear sector and hold companies responsible for any damages to the environment.

While the opposition recklessly opposes safety measures that will protect Canadians, we are making progress on what matters.

* * *

[*Translation*]

QUEBEC BRIDGE

Mr. Denis Blanchette (Louis-Hébert, NDP): Mr. Speaker, the federal government has wasted close to \$400,000 in legal costs fighting CN over the Quebec Bridge. That \$400,000 was not spent on bridge repairs.

The provincial government came to an amicable agreement with CN. However, the Conservatives refuse to budge and are making no progress. Had the federal government not been involved in this matter, it would not have dragged on for nine years.

Will the minister change tactics and invest in the Quebec bridge infrastructure instead of ringing up legal bills?

[*English*]

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, the owner of this bridge is Canadian National. It made a deal with the Government of Canada back in 1997, and the government assumed it would fully restore the bridge. It has not done that, and that is why, on behalf of Canadian taxpayers, the Government of Canada is taking CN to court to ensure that taxpayers get value for the deal they made for the bridge.

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RAIL TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, CN is a problem. CN Rail will abandon the line from Bathurst to Miramichi that VIA Rail needs to connect the Maritimes to the rest of Canada. CN is also ending passenger service north of Sault Ste. Marie. Passenger rail service is in jeopardy across our country.

Why will the Minister of Transport or the Conservative members for Sault Ste. Marie or Miramichi not take action to save passenger rail from CN Rail?

Business of the House

Hon. Lisa Raitt (Minister of Transport, CPC): Mr. Speaker, as the hon. member has said, CN is a private company that takes decisions regarding which lines it wants to operate in the country. If it chooses not to operate and to discontinue a line, it goes through a process that is set out in the Canada Transportation Act. CN is following that right now. We are monitoring closely. We are working with VIA Rail and with everybody who has an interest in these lines to get to the right place.

That said, it is incredibly important to note that VIA Rail is an arm's-length corporation that makes its own business decisions.

The Speaker: That concludes question period for today.

Some hon. members: No, no.

The Speaker: Do not cry because it is over; smile because it is happening.

* * *

● (1505)

PRESENCE IN GALLERY

The Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the Ladies Gallery of my provincial and territorial colleagues: the Hon. Kevin Murphy, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Nova Scotia; the Hon. Carolyn Bertram, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Prince Edward Island; Monsieur Jacques Chagnon, Président de l'Assemblée nationale du Québec; the Hon. Dan D'Autremont, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan; the Hon. Dale Graham, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick; the Hon. Jackie Jacobson, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories; the Hon. David Laxton, Speaker of the Yukon Legislative Assembly; the Hon. George Qulaut, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut; the Hon. Daryl Reid, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba; the Hon. Linda Reid, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia; the Hon. Ross Wiseman, Speaker of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland and Labrador; the Hon. Gene Zwozdesky, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta; and the Hon. Bas Balkissoon, Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: I would also like to draw the attention of hon. members to the presence in the gallery of the Hon. Peter Taptuna, Premier of Nunavut, and the Hon. Johnny Mike, Minister of the Environment of Nunavut.

Some hon. members: Hear, hear!

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BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Mr. Nathan Cullen (Skeena—Bulkley Valley, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I cannot let pass the comment that your closing remarks at question period are setting a new bar. I hope it is sustainable, and you have a plethora of ways to bring us some mirth at the end of tough question periods.

Today is Chinese New Year's eve, and I join all my NDP colleagues to wish everyone a happy Chinese New Year. This year

we celebrate the Year of the Horse. The horse is kind, fast and energetic. It represents power, grace and mobility. New Democrats wish those celebrating this new year good fortune, good health, and prosperity.

[The member spoke in Chinese]

[Translation]

I am honoured to rise on behalf of the official opposition to ask the government what it has planned for the House for the remainder of this week and next week.

[English]

In particular today, I am rising to ask the government House leader if his party will allow a vote tonight on the important motion that we are debating here today in the House.

The motion calls for us to stand in solidarity with our armed forces personnel and reverse the devastating decision to close eight Veterans Affairs offices, which is taking effect tomorrow.

The Minister of Veterans Affairs, whoever he is, has obviously failed in his performance this week, but my hope is that he does not add hypocrisy and insult to injury to our brave veterans by ducking out on the vote altogether, ahead of the veterans office closures tomorrow.

Hon. Peter Van Loan (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons, CPC): Mr. Speaker, first let me wish you and everybody else a happy new year.

[Translation]

This afternoon, we will continue the NDP's opposition day. Tomorrow, we will consider Bill C-8, the Combating Contraband Products Act, at report stage and third reading. Should we need to call a second bill, we will resume debate on Bill C-2, the Respect for Communities Act, which went through its seventh day of debate on Monday.

Monday and Tuesday shall be the third and fourth allotted days. Wednesday and Thursday, we plan to continue the second reading debate on Bill C-20, the Canada-Honduras Economic Growth and Prosperity Act.

[English]

As for the invitation from my friend, I certain would not want to tread upon the very important responsibilities of the whips, and I am sure they will carry out those discussions among themselves.

Mr. Joe Preston: Mr. Speaker, I seek unanimous consent of the House to revert to the rubric "Presenting Reports from Committees" under Routine Proceedings, in order to present two committee reports and seek concurrence of the House in those reports.

The Speaker: Is that agreed?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

*Business of Supply***ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS**

[English]

COMMITTEES OF THE HOUSE

PROCEDURE AND HOUSE AFFAIRS

Mr. Joe Preston (Elgin—Middlesex—London, CPC): Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Orders 104 and 114, I have the honour to present, in both official languages, the fifth and sixth reports of the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs regarding membership of committees of the House, and I should like to move concurrence at this time.

The Speaker: Does the hon. member 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)

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

● (1510)

[English]

BUSINESS OF SUPPLY

OPPOSITION MOTION—CANADIAN FORCES

The House resumed consideration of the motion.

Mr. Jack Harris (St. John's East, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to rise today to speak to this extremely important motion. It is important because it is sadly necessary for this motion to be brought before the House of Commons. One would think that we would not have to debate a motion such as this in the House of Commons.

For those who are watching and have not had a chance to see it, I will read it. The motion sounds like something that would be taken for granted and reads:

That, in the opinion of the House, the men and women who bravely serve Canada in the armed forces should be able to count on the government for support in their time of need, and that the government should demonstrate this support by (a) immediately addressing the mental health crisis facing Canadian soldiers and veterans by hiring appropriate mental health professionals;

Should that need to be addressed by the House of Commons? It should be taken for granted.

The motion continues:

(b) reversing its decision to close veterans' offices;

We have had a significant debate about that already.

It continues:

and (c) prioritizing and concluding the over 50 outstanding boards of inquiry on military suicides so that grieving families may have answers and closure.

Those are the three matters before the House for debate today.

I should add that one of the extremely important aspects of a board of inquiry is that its purpose is not only to find out the cause of death and what contributed to the death of a soldier in the case of a suicide, but also to examine what preventative measures may be undertaken to ensure that it does not happen again.

We have the shocking situation that in excess of 50 boards of inquiry, whose numbers are going up not down, have been outstanding, some going back as far as 2008.

The minister made an announcement today that some action will be taken. I saw the release. It indicates that a task force will be undertaken to speed up this process. What disturbs me is that in the release these inquiries are called technical efforts. The words used are that there is "a special team to clear the backlog of technical investigations into suicides within the ranks".

These are not technical investigations. These are military boards of inquiry, headed by a senior military officer, with investigations. It is a formal approach taken under the Department of National Defence Act and a defence administrative order directive as to how these boards are undertaken, because they are or ought to be taken seriously within the military, particularly when determining the cause of, and contributing factors to, the death of a serving Canadian Forces member.

I am glad that the minister has finally taken it seriously. This matter has been raised for almost a year now. In the case of these outstanding boards of inquiry, questions have been raised in the House with not very satisfactory answers.

At long last, it seems that the government is now prepared to speed this up and get them completed. It is shameful that it was not given the priority it deserved. This is something that should have happened. We have no rules within the administration of the Department of National Defence for the timeline as to how soon these things should be done. What is astonishing is that we do not have any guidelines or rules as to when a board of inquiry would be released. It could sit on the Chief of the Defence Staff's desk indefinitely, without a board of inquiry being released. That is important to know for many reasons. The families of anyone who loses his or her life are concerned about the cause of death, no matter what it is.

● (1515)

The contributing factor to that death can be particularly important in the case of a suicide. In fact, the idea that the board of inquiry would potentially come up with some means of preventing such action in the future is something that is very important to a family and to all serving members of the Canadian Forces.

The mental health of Canadian Forces members has received a lot of attention of late, and rightly so. We have soldiers who have served their country in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and other places where they have endured trauma. They have what has been defined as operational stress injuries.

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That is the overriding term for trauma that comes about as a result of participating or being engaged in combat or enduring a serious traumatic experience. It happens in wartime; it happens in combat; it happens in other aspects of life. Sexual assault and sexual abuse can cause post traumatic stress disorder. It is a well-known and recognized disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*. It is something that is well researched and well known.

There are a huge number of incidents of post traumatic stress disorder coming out of the Afghanistan situation and previous engagements by Canadian Forces soldiers. There was a warning early in the Afghanistan conflict that this was going to happen and that we should prepare for it. I do not think that was done. In fact, the urgent, continuing and growing need for these services has outpaced the department's response.

A recent report by the Canadian Forces ombudsman mentioned the number of mental health professionals that we have. The numbers in 2008 were approximately the same as they are today, despite the fact that we have members of the Canadian Forces returning from Afghanistan in large numbers since that time. Nearly 25,000 deployments to Afghanistan have taken place. Far too many injuries have occurred as a result of these deployments in the war.

These Canadian Forces members need assistance in an urgent manner. These disorders need to be treated just as seriously and importantly as any physical injuries that our Canadian Forces members have suffered.

A problem that has recently been identified is that the positions available to be filled have not been filled because of bureaucratic decision-making inside the Department of Defence. We had information that 200 people were waiting to fill positions, but the positions could not be filled because there was a hiring freeze within the Department of Defence placed on it by Treasury Board. It was all designed to save money and to cut back on expenditures in the military and all across government, to the detriment of the needs of Canadian Forces members. This has to stop.

Our leader has asked the Prime Minister to take this on as a personal priority. We need urgent recognition that we have a crisis on our hands that must be dealt with to ensure that our Canadian Forces members and veterans have access to the services they need. We say "Canadian Forces members and veterans". Some of them are actually still serving members but are veterans of combat in Afghanistan. There is an overlap in the terminology. We have people who have left the Canadian Forces who are veterans under the care of Veterans Affairs.

That gets me to the third problem we have on our agenda today, the closure of Veterans Affairs offices. We hear about the 600 points of contact. That is exactly what those are, points of contact. One can call a number and eventually there may be someone to talk to. This is what the veterans were told yesterday, that there is someone there who can help them get to a computer app. One of the veterans asked what an "app" was. They will get the veterans to a computer or to a 1-800 number.

That is the kind of service implied in these points of contact. It is not the kind of service that has been delivered by Veterans Affairs

employees in the offices that are being closed tomorrow. Eight more offices are being closed, and one has already been closed.

• (1520)

I would like to have unanimous support for this motion. I think the members opposite ought to change their minds on the veterans' centres closures. The other two matters are matters that ought to be accepted by everyone anyway.

Mr. James Bezan (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will thank my colleague for his input today and also for the work he is doing on the Standing Committee on National Defence, where we are looking at the care of our ill and injured soldiers. When we talk about ill and injured, we are talking about both the physical and invisible injuries that have occurred because of service as members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

I just want to make sure that everyone is aware that the number of mental health workers is increasing. I know that since the fall, we have been able to increase that number to 400. That is over 30 new positions filled. The number of mental health workers we have now is more than double what we had just a few years ago.

Also I want to make sure that people are aware that not only do members have access to on-base mental health professionals but through Blue Cross, which is medical insurance, they have access to over 4,000 mental health care providers within the Blue Cross family. That helps to reduce some of these wait times.

The member mentioned the Board of Internal Economy. The minister said earlier today that we have directed National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, where the Chief of the Defence Staff has taken the lead on this, that this has to be resolved. It is unacceptable that there is a backlog, and it is going to be resolved very quickly and these reports will be filed.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. Speaker, I, too, would like to acknowledge the parliamentary secretary's work at the defence committee and formerly as chair of the defence committee. He is quite familiar with this ongoing study. We are working together to make, hopefully, very strong recommendations to further improve the care and treatment of ill and injured soldiers.

Unfortunately, it has taken until today to get a commitment from the minister to speed up the process of these military boards of inquiry. I hope it will lead to very quick conclusions and hopefully to some recommendations that can help to prevent further issues of suicide within the Canadian Forces.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments made by the member. I want to talk more about the difference between the service points. The government says that it has a large number of services points. That service point number is based on a telephone number. If people have an issue, they pick up the phone and call the number. The government says it has increased the number of service points in that sense.

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On the other hand, we are really talking about the offices in which our vets can meet with an individual as opposed to having to talk on the telephone or go online. In many ways, this is the type of service our vets have grown to depend on and is what I believe Canadians expect the government to provide. It is something that cannot be replaced by a telephone or a computer. That is why the government needs to keep these offices open.

I am wondering if the member would expand on that need.

Mr. Jack Harris: Mr. Speaker, unfortunately, it is true that the Service Canada centres we are talking about as points of contact are the same organizations that are already overburdened with calls and with layoffs of their own. They have so many calls, for example, in the area of employment insurance, which the service centres also handle, that the wait times for getting access to employment insurance are actually increasing from what is supposed to be a 28-day maximum window to now in excess of 33 or 34 days, and more than that in some places.

People are actually being sent to centres where there are already complaints about how long it takes to get through. We are not satisfied that employees will have the kind of training necessary to ensure that the veterans who do manage to get in contact with them will be able to get the help they need. We understand that it is essentially a referral service to a telephone number or to a website, which people may or may not be able to get access to.

• (1525)

Mr. Ted Opitz (Etobicoke Centre, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, also a fellow veteran and somebody who was foundational in starting the True Patriot Love organization, the Treble Victor Group, and others.

I am pleased to take part in this debate today on the care of our men and women in uniform, either active or retired. First, I would like to take a few moments to offer my sincere condolences to the families affected by these tragedies.

As a proud Canadian, I have great admiration, as well as profound appreciation, for the important contributions members of the Canadian Armed Forces bring to this country. I served for a number of years myself with an operational tour. I have watched many of my peers who served along with me and have observed some of the problems they have developed through operational tours, whether it be mental challenges or physical injuries. It has always been distressing to watch a comrade suffer after giving tremendous service to this country.

Unfortunately, in the last two months, we have seen the tragic news reports about members of our military forces committing suicide. This has affected me personally. I have known individuals, both military and civilian, including one fairly recently, who have taken their own lives. These incidents are exceptionally troubling.

We have a vested interest in our men and women in uniform, because they are our soldiers. They are our protectors. They not only defend us in places abroad but also protect our people in times of emergency or distress, as we have seen during floods and other emergencies in this country. I salute the courage and strength they

demonstrate through all of the ordeals and all the tasks they take on willingly.

Mental health care for military personnel is a priority for the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, and of course, the Government of Canada. Much is being done in this area. There is a lot of research continuing to happen. There is better coordination among all departments. The minister has ordered it. He is working on a review of the system, and in fact, there is ongoing research at DRDC. What a lot of people do not realize is that Canada has world-class medical defence scientists working on the problem. A lot is being researched right now, including hormonal issues and sleep deprivation and some of the issues that increase the stress and damage from mental injuries.

The government has recently increased its annual investment in mental health for our service members, bringing the total to \$50 million. These funds are being used to enhance the military's medical health program and to ensure a skilled and sustainable mental health workforce, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health nurses, social workers, addictions counsellors, and case managers. To ensure that military members are provided with the best possible care, the Canadian Armed Forces also conducts research in the areas of virtual reality, medication, and brain imagery and has made clinical advancements in the area of mental health treatment.

One of the areas that has done research, as I just mentioned, is DRDC. As the hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence has noted, on the defence committee, the study into the care of the ill and injured is intensive and ongoing, and we look forward to seeing the results of that study at a future time.

Our forces also have a health promotion program called Strengthening the Forces. It offers suicide awareness and education training to promote mental fitness and to mitigate the incidence of mental health injuries. In fact, there have been a lot of aide-mémoires issued by the Canadian Armed Forces, which I think are absolutely brilliant pieces.

As a former commander myself, trying to make my soldiers aware and trying to make them able to self-identify when they are having problems is something that is critical to care. It is a leadership issue to stay on top of that. I did that as a CO, and I know that other COs are hugely concerned about their soldiers. Within unit lines, that communication is going back and forth all the time. Other leaders and peers have been instructed, and now understand, to watch for changes in patterns and for personality changes, not only in their families but at home and on the work site. They try to identify those problems early.

• (1530)

It is not a perfect system, but we attempt to do that, because sometimes the military culture, as it is, prevents self-identification, because a soldier, especially a combat soldier, never wants to be identified as weak. What we need to do is change the culture and the terminology around that, because it is okay to say, "I have a problem".

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A mental injury is the same as a physical injury. It just takes longer to percolate. We are seeing that with our allies abroad. We are working very closely with the Americans, the Brits, and others. They are having the same issues with their soldiers, especially the most recently returned from Afghanistan, because that particular deployment has seen intensive combat. The injuries do not always manifest themselves immediately. They can percolate for years. It is an injury nevertheless. This is something we have to pay very close attention to.

The goal of the Surgeon General's mental health strategy is to help prioritize the efforts of the Canadian Armed Forces. I just outlined some of them.

There is a booklet called *Road to Mental Readiness* and one called *Road to Mental Readiness Aide Memoire*, which I think is very well done, by the Canadian Forces.

The forces have received accolades from national and international health bodies for our mental health leadership and for the comprehensiveness of our system.

Is it all perfect? Absolutely not. We are finding out new things all the time, every day. This is something all armies around the world are experiencing, particularly at the end of an operational mission. We have to stay on top of this. We have to try to stay ahead of the curve. I know the minister has done an excellent job of trying to do that. He has demonstrated great leadership, not only in his own department but by reaching out to other departments to try to encourage co-operation and coordination so that everybody is on the same page. That is one of the issues.

Yes, sometimes there are disconnects between departments. Those disconnects are something we are working very hard to address and correct as soon as we find them.

Good health, and equally mental health, is fundamental to the effectiveness of any military force. Since the Canadian Armed Forces is a subset of Canadian society, its members' mental health reflects the status of Canadians in general.

It poses a greater burden on our health care system than all cancers combined. It is estimated that one in five Canadians will develop a mental illness. Every day, half a million Canadians are absent from work due to mental illness. This is something important to know. Yes, we have this going on in the military right now, which we are gravely concerned about. However, this is an issue that is widely felt in the civilian world as well.

I think I need to mention that often, Canadian Armed Forces veterans are hesitant to self-identify, because they do not want to be stigmatized. That is something else we have to address. We have to change the definition and the parameters around that stigmatization, which really does not exist. However, it exists in the minds of soldiers, who do not want to appear in any way, shape, or form, in their terminology, broken.

Tuesday we had Bell Let's Talk Day. If military members do not want to address an issue through the chain of command and need some assistance with advice and guidance, there are a lot of civilian lines they can also call to get some of that advice and guidance if they feel safer doing that.

I would urge all members to find, when they need it, some advice and guidance somewhere. There are a lot of vehicles available to them to do that, and it is critical that they do.

Studies have demonstrated that the overall prevalence of one or more mental illnesses in the Canadian Armed Forces is similar to that of the general population, as I said. I also said that we are working to address the stigma attached, which we hope to eliminate through communication, through information, and through the work of all members of this House.

• (1535)

Quite frankly, every member of this House is very concerned about this, and rightly so. Every member of this House is very concerned about the health and well-being of all of our soldiers, whether they are currently serving or are past their service time. It is important that we all note, and that Canadian armed forces personnel past and present understand, that this House is on their side and we are going to work very closely.

There is a lot to talk about here. We are going to continue to do that. It is crucial that we do, and it is crucial that we put all the moving parts together to ensure that the system that is capable of assisting our soldiers and making sure they achieve their optimal health is put in place. It is our responsibility to do so.

[Translation]

Ms. Rosane Doré Lefebvre (Alfred-Pellan, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I think it is shameful that the government boasts about being there for members of the Canadian Forces, and then it completely abandons them. It is time for this government to stop shirking its responsibilities and to address the crisis facing soldiers and veterans.

Every year, the Résidence du Patrimoine in Laval invites me to commemorate our veterans on Remembrance Day. Many people shed tears as they shared their experiences in the Second World War. I listened to them with a lot of respect and thank them for sharing.

These men and women, who sacrificed part of their lives for their country, have to continue fighting to assert their most fundamental rights. That is unacceptable. We must help them and work with them.

Why do the Conservatives refuse to treat our veterans with respect?

[English]

Mr. Ted Opitz: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for her question, but I reject it entirely.

First, there are three veterans sitting right here. In fact, the member also mentioned World War II. My father served through World War II from the very first day until the very last, and was incarcerated in the gulag and went through combat all over the place; and my mom was actually taken as forced labour by the Nazis. Both of them, in their own way, still deal with those issues of so long ago. Those of us who are more recent veterans have seen our own comrades go through troubled times, and we are absolutely distressed about it. We have more veterans in this caucus, I think, than there have been at any given time.

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I appreciate what the hon. member is saying, but the care, health, and well-being of our Canadian armed forces is a priority for our government. We have demonstrated that and we continue to demonstrate that, and the Canadian armed forces will always have our support.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, like the member, I too am a veteran of the Canadian Forces.

Having said that, many people in Canada recognize that there is a substantial difference between picking up a telephone and calling a number, where they are receiving some sort of assistance over the telephone, versus being able to go to an office where they walk through a door and meet with someone to discuss their concern. It is the lack of face-to-face contact that is really upsetting a large number of our veterans from coast to coast to coast. This is what we are asking the government to look at.

Why do the Conservatives want to close that face-to-face contact? It is something that our veterans believe, and Canadians as a whole believe, our veterans should be able to have. Is there really the need to close them down? Canadians, members of the Liberal Party, and others are saying, no, keep them open. Why close them?

Mr. Ted Opatz: Mr. Speaker, the face-to-face contact has not been eliminated. It exists. There are multiple ways now that we reach out. I heard one of the members earlier basically mock apps. Well we have a wide gap in the generations of our veterans, going from back in World War II to today.

The younger veterans will be able to deal with those apps quite effectively because that is part of their culture, part of what they have learned and part of what they use in school. Everybody has a smart phone and they can easily access those apps, and it is great for them.

For the Second World War veterans, sure it is a little more traditional, whether they go down to the office themselves, where there is an expansion of over 600 points of contact, or if they cannot go down to the office, somebody is going to go to them. I am sorry but a POTS line, meaning plain old telephone service, is sometimes the most efficient way. Although it is old school, people can pick up the phone and ask for whatever service they need at that time.

It is quite efficient that we have multiple methods for all veterans to be able to reach out and access the services they critically need.

• (1540)

Mr. Erin O'Toole (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade, CPC): Mr. Speaker, it is always a distinct honour for me to rise in this House of Commons, but today I rise with a profound mixture of sadness and disappointment.

As a member of Parliament who has served, I am sad whenever I see veterans who feel their government or indeed their member of Parliament from any side of this place is not here for their best interest. I know I speak for myself and some veterans who are on this side, but I also speak to my friends on the other side, including my friend from Winnipeg Centre who hosted an event for veterans with me last year.

I am disappointed, though, because Ottawa has become a place where we cannot actually have a serious debate about an important public policy area like this. There is someone on that side proving that point right now.

I am also disappointed with the low level of knowledge amongst people in this place and people who gather and speak to us outside this place on how our veterans have been served, historically through to today.

I am also disappointed that just this week, on a panel, when I suggested the Legion plays an important role in the care of our veterans, I was mocked for that position.

I am going to use my time and the privilege I have as a member of Parliament to try to raise the level of debate for one moment and to provide some education. I hope my friends on all sides listen intently.

I joined the Canadian Forces at 18, and when I was released after 12 years of service, I said to my commanding officer, Colonel Al Blair at 423 Squadron in Shearwater, that I would be a committed civilian, supporting our CF and our veterans. I rarely speak about that work, but it has been a critical part of my adult life and a critical reason why I ran for Parliament.

I am actually an average soldier, or airman. I joined because I love this country. My area of Canada, Durham, has had profoundly successful and important soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Our community also lost Trooper Darryl Caswell during the war in Afghanistan. I know his family. I know the people who attended that funeral. Like many, I stood on the Highway of Heroes with my community to show support.

My area has also been represented by parliamentarians. Rev. John Weir Foote, a Victoria Cross winner from Dieppe, served Durham in the provincial parliament. Our only padre to receive the VC when he leapt out of the boats to care for his men and was imprisoned for the rest of the war, he was our local MPP. Another VC winner from Dieppe, Cec Merritt from British Columbia, actually served in this place.

We have had some profoundly important veterans in this place. I would invite the members to look at the statue of Baker out in the hallway. He was a sitting member of Parliament who died in World War I.

A sitting member of Parliament from Uxbridge, in my riding, the MP for Ontario North, served at Vimy during World War I and died, not at Vimy but at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal. He was brought back from the war because of a nervous breakdown. That is what it was called in World War I. He had PTSD. He leapt from a window in Montreal before having to face the families of Uxbridge who lost sons under his command. We are now addressing these real needs.

Just yesterday my friend, the member for Kingston and the Islands spoke about the hon. John Matheson, another MP and one of my personal heroes who served our country with distinction.

We have almost 600,000 veterans in Canada and 80,000-plus members of the Canadian Forces, regular force and reserve, who will be veterans in the future. Of them, 130,000 have a file with Veterans Affairs, and 7,500 have an assigned case manager. A case manager is assigned when there is assessment that the veteran needs additional support based on an assessment of income, health, living arrangements, family support, activity, and addictions.

● (1545)

Veterans Affairs receives 730,000 calls per year. Fifteen thousand veterans have registered for online My VAC accounts, primarily newer Afghanistan veterans. Home visits are not tracked; that is unfortunate. It is something we should work on tracking, because veterans with injuries can be visited at home. There are 68 VAC offices, consisting of stand-alone VACs, 24 integrated personnel support centres, and 17 OSI clinics. Soon services are going to be offered at 600-plus Service Canada offices.

To address the Legion point—my friends opposite did not think it plays an important role—I say that the Legion is the most important supporter of our veterans. It was founded in 1925. In 1926 an act of Parliament was passed in this place. Section 4 of the act empowers it with the purpose to care for the welfare of our veterans. There are 1,461 branches across Canada and 1,400 veteran service officers. John Greenfield, the veteran service officer for branch 178 in Bowmanville, has personally handled 450 cases. He attends their home, or they visit him. He helps them, face-to-face, and gets benefits for those veterans.

In 2012, 12,000 veterans were helped by these visits from veteran service officers, who only have expenses paid and training through the poppy fund. The Legion has also helped with the veterans transition network, out of the University of British Columbia, and in recent years, the Veterans Affairs ministry has empowered the Legion to run the visitation program, where thousands of veterans of Korea and the Cold War have been visited by veteran service officers to assess their health and well-being. The Legion remains the most important direct, face-to-face contact for our veterans. I thank the Legion deeply for that.

The question before us here in the House and in conversations I have had in recent days, including with some veterans who came to the Hill, is the concern about the closure of some offices. We have to talk about assessing the needs of our veterans now and in the future. As my colleague from Etobicoke Centre said, there are our veterans who are in their 20s, from Afghanistan, and our veterans who are in their 80s or 90s.

My area of Ontario, the Durham region, has never had a stand-alone Veterans Affairs office. Have the veterans not been cared for? Yes, they have. There are a range of ways they have been cared for and will continue to be cared for. The important issue we have before us as parliamentarians, as Canadians, is to ask whether it is better to stay put and watch offices have five, six, ten, or twelve visits per day, or is it better to open up two, three, four, or five offices across the country to address mental health? Veterans Affairs offices are administrative points of contact. We have heard that term. They do not deliver benefits for our veterans. They help them access them. I would suggest the top people who help them access benefits are the veteran service officers across the country. They can also access

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these services through a range of other means. What our government is doing with Service Canada offices is now allowing that direct access point where face-to-face contact could be required to help with forms or other things.

In October, when some of these veterans came to Ottawa, I met with them. I attended the media event. One of them said to us that their issue relates specifically to whether Veterans Affairs training or experienced case officers would be available in Service Canada. We listened. The eight closures will have Veterans Affairs case workers in them as of next week, full stop, permanent. With a caseload of less than ten visits a day, one is appropriate. In most cases, the Service Canada office is in the same building or nearby. In my region of Durham, this will now give four offices in the area for that personal contact if one of our Legion veteran service officers cannot help them. Veterans did not have this before these changes.

● (1550)

I know this is an important debate. I know my friend from Sackville—Eastern Shore is passionate about these issues. I met him as an officer at Shearwater, and I truly believe he has veterans at heart. However, we also have the responsibility to ensure our system addresses the needs now and in the future. We have to make sure we meet the needs of all veterans. We have to meet the growing mental health challenges that our veterans face. These changes are part of our plan to serve our veterans better.

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the comments by my colleague for Durham in this important and very disturbing debate.

One of my constituents is Ms. Sheila Fynes. Her son is Stuart Langridge, who took his own life in 2008, having been told by the military that it was a function of substance abuse rather than the deep-rooted mental health problems he was facing.

My constituent Ms. Fynes talks about an endless array of investigations by a board of inquiry, military ombudsman, and she speaks passionately about the level of frustration that she feels. She claims that the expression, “if you’re not deployable, you’re not employable”, continues to rule at the military services in Canada. She said, “The military is always looking for ways to distance themselves from any responsibility”.

To my colleague, is her experience unusual or typical?

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the member for his question, and I would like to offer my condolences to the family of Mr. Langridge.

These changes are so that we can help to treat people like Mr. Langridge. We know there are mental health challenges; I think everyone in this House knows it.

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These are the decisions of government. Do we try to hire more mental health workers? Do we open more operational stress injury clinics? Do we fund the veterans transition network, run by a veteran who has overcome PTSD? Or, do we only do things the way they were done in the past?

I would suggest to my hon. colleague that a combination of work with the Canadian Forces while the person is still serving, and with Veterans Affairs after release, has to catch mental health issues quickly. We have to train their unit to recognize these challenges and work with the families as well.

Hon. Gerry Byrne (Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, in Humber—St. Barbe—Baie Verte, in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador, there are two very important and productive offices that I would like to highlight. One is a Canadian Armed Forces recruitment centre, which is one of the most successful, efficient and highest-performing recruitment centres in all of Canada. Young people from western and northern Newfoundland are being recruited to the Canadian Armed Forces at a significant and substantial rate. In fact, the Canadian Armed Forces decided that they would expand that office. The other office is a Veterans Affairs service centre. That office is closing as of tomorrow.

I would like to ask the hon. member where exactly he thinks the veterans of tomorrow will come from. Will they come from a place where recruitment to the Canadian Armed Forces is on an upward trend and rising?

The current Canadian Armed Forces contingent is proudly overrepresented by the people of Newfoundland and Labrador. In fact, while Newfoundland and Labrador only represents 1.5% of the Canadian population, the actual contingent of its people within the Canadian Armed Forces represents 8% to 10%.

Where exactly are the future veterans coming from? They are coming from the places where—

• (1555)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade.

Mr. Erin O'Toole: Mr. Speaker, I am glad the hon. member asked his question in the way that he did.

I had the profound honour to serve aboard *HMCS St. John's*, the proud frigate for the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Atlantic Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador in particular, has a higher level of enrolment in the Canadian Forces. Within the Canadian Forces and within the navy, all the Newfoundlanders and Labradorians want to get on that ship.

The member is right; we are recruiting from those areas. The issue we have to address is where they are going to settle after service and how they are going to access need. I would ask the member to think about the next 25 years for these people who are signing up now at the recruiting centre. How will they draw services?

Veterans in my area, and I have talked to some, even ones that have been released with service injuries, do not visit the traditional bricks and mortar office. They tend to use the phone. They tend to register for and use a "My VAC Account".

As I said in my remarks, we need to address the needs now and in the future, and offer flexibility for these veterans who are critical, including our special veterans from Newfoundland and Labrador.

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I will be sharing my time with the member for Rivière-du-Nord. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my colleague from Châteauguay—Saint-Constant for introducing this very important motion. The men and women who serve our country deserve to be treated with the utmost respect and dignity. Sadly, many retired RCMP and Canadian Forces members are not being given the respect they have earned.

I am most grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate concerning some quite remarkable citizens of this country. They are indeed remarkable citizens because collectively they take citizenship very seriously. They prove their commitment to Canada through their service in the Canadian Forces.

When our country was in danger during World War I and World War II, or when our country called upon Canadian Forces members to be peacekeepers in places far from home, such as Somalia, Bosnia, Lebanon, Cyprus, East Timor, and Afghanistan when they were sent to serve in NATO, or when our country asked them to help communities jeopardized by floods, earthquakes, ice storms, forest fires, hurricanes, or tornadoes, they did not hesitate. They did what they were asked to do. They did their duty in the World Wars, in Korea, and in a multitude of deployments since then.

In the course of that duty, our country made a contract with them. Canada made promises that the men and women of the armed forces would not be forgotten or abandoned. The government made, and continues to make, promises assuring these men and women that they would be remembered and honoured by a grateful nation.

That is a wonderful sentiment. I know without a shadow of a doubt that the people of Canada are grateful and that they do remember and honour our servicemen and women in the Canadian Forces and the RCMP. I see it every day from my constituents in London—Fanshawe.

However, sadly what has become painfully obvious is that the government neither honours our veterans, peacekeepers, and those currently serving, nor is it willing to provide the services, pensions, programs, and special care to which these veterans, members of the armed forces, and their families are entitled. It is painfully obvious that the services needed are not there or are not effective.

Business of Supply

In the past few months, the number of veteran suicides has been heartbreaking. There have been eight military suicides in the past two months alone. We mourn with those families. Clearly we are not doing our job in ensuring that all of our veterans have access to the help they need. The policies that the Conservative government has put in place are not working. Further cuts and the removal of services is not going to improve the situation. This is an obligation, and it is not going away.

According to Dr. Ruth Stewart at Athabasca University, “A growing number of veterans, as well as serving Canadian military personnel, suffer from post traumatic stress disorder and other operational stress injuries”. She argues that the ability to deliver effective and relevant psychological intervention is increasingly urgent.

I have a quote from Dr. Pierre Morisset, a retired major-general and the chair of the scientific advisory committee for Veterans Affairs. He was a witness before the Veterans Affairs committee in February of last year. Dr. Morisset said “When a soldier leaves the forces and is officially known as a veteran, then he's treated in the civilian health sector”.

Dr. Morisset then went on to say that the civilian health care system “is not necessarily tuned to the reality of what kind of life the soldier may have had”. Similarly, Dr. Stewart argues that the Canadian Forces represent a distinct culture containing distinct subcultures. They possess unique languages, norms, and customs, and are socially stratified to a degree that is completely foreign to most North American civilians.

Once a soldier leaves the military, he or she is left to the care of civilian doctors who do not have the expertise to deal with the specific issues that veterans face. How can they, when one considers Dr. Morisset's observations?

Veterans are our national heroes. As such, they are a federal responsibility and should be looked after by the federal government. They are not, as the Conservative government believes, a problem to be offloaded onto the provinces.

The decision to close nine veterans offices to save money and make the government appear to be managing the finances of the country seems to be part of a larger picture, one of low priority and the out-of-touch approach the Conservative government shows regarding the care of our veterans.

● (1600)

I have examples. First, according to its report from last year, the Royal Canadian Legion identified 150 homeless veterans in Ontario alone. This is a disgrace.

Second is the cost of funeral and burial services. Some years ago the assets cut-off to provide monetary help through the Last Post Fund was \$24,000. That included all the assets of the veterans. That amount was reduced by the Liberals. It is now just over \$12,000. In 2014, the cut-off under the Conservatives remains at just over \$12,000. This means that 67% of veterans will not qualify for federal help. It seems to me that \$12,000 is rather a pittance when we look at the cost of things today.

Third, a veteran can be reimbursed for health-related travel. That is fine. However, what happens if that veteran cannot afford the cost of travel in the first place? It seems to me that there could be, and there are, veterans who need to travel for health care and cannot provide the upfront money.

Fourth, there is a shortfall in the number of mental health workers. The promise to hire them was made in 2003, over 10 years ago, and we are still waiting for all the positions to be filled. A health care provider told me it takes a minimum of six months for CF personnel to access health for post-traumatic stress disorder; that is six months for someone in profound and immediate distress.

Fifth, the closing of Veterans Affairs offices will be effective tomorrow. Service levels will be reduced for veterans because these closures are coupled with staffing cuts at the remaining regional offices. Regina, for example, will be taking on 4,500 files from Saskatoon, doubling its client numbers. The Regina office has seen a reduction in staff from 16 to 11.5 since 2012. My local London office will see its caseload increase by almost half when it takes on files from Windsor. The London office has two fewer staff now than it did in 2012.

Finally, there are the ridiculous lengths that the government is prepared to go to create the illusion that it is providing real help. Why on earth would the government spend money on an app for a smart phone instead of addressing the shortfalls in care for our veterans?

I should not have to remind the members opposite that supporting our troops means that we have to support our veterans too. When will the government stop with the platitudes and start looking at the issues that our veterans face every day? It is the least the government can do, and it is the morally right thing to do.

New Democrats are committed to our veterans and we are calling on the government to make veterans a priority. Specifically, we are asking for immediate hiring of the long-promised mental health professionals to assist soldiers and veterans with their mental health needs. We ask that the government reverse the wrong-headed decision to close regional veterans affairs offices that provide front-line services to veterans. We ask that it prioritize and conclude the over 50 ongoing boards of inquiry on military suicides to give grieving families answers and closure. Care for our veterans is part of the contract, the covenant, that we undertake with the people who voluntarily enlist and protect our country. We asked them to serve; now it is our turn to serve them.

I beseech the government. It is important that we have a decision on this today. We have asked for a vote on this motion tonight and we have asked the government to reverse its decision, to say, “We made a mistake. We are going to allow those offices to remain. We are going to serve the people who served us. We are going to serve our heroes”.

Business of Supply

What did the Conservatives do? They said no, we are putting the vote off until Monday. They are putting off their responsibility. They are putting off that vote so they can say there was nothing they could do.

We have known about this plan to reduce offices and staffing for over a year. We have been asking the government about it for over a year. We are at the crunch now, Mr. Speaker. I implore you to speak to the members opposite to tell them that our veterans deserve better than what the government is giving.

• (1605)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my colleague from the NDP in the London area for eloquently stating that when the VAC centre closes in Windsor, a lot of the veterans from Windsor will have to go to London to get service. She pointed out that the London office is being thinned out by caseworkers and case managers.

I wonder if the member has any figures that she can share with us on how many case officers are in London now, the current load, and what the impact would be once the Windsor office is closed and about 1,500 veterans are shifted to the London office. How are they going to cope? Does she have any figures she can share with us? It would be greatly appreciated.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, as I said, and as the member indicated, the caseload for London will double. The number of staff has already been reduced by four and a half. I am not sure of the specific number of persons in the London office, other than it was 16. It is now 11.5. That will create a real problem.

Many of these veterans are in a delicate state. Let us think about the young men or women who are coming back from the travails of Afghanistan, or even from a peacekeeping mission. They need someone who knows and understands what they are talking about. They need that face to face. They need the opportunity to sit quietly. That is being taken away. It is reprehensible.

We owe these men and women something far more than what is being given by the government. It is time that there was recognition of that.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The hon. member for Edmonton Centre on a point of order.

Hon. Laurie Hawn: Mr. Speaker, I want to hark back to the previous speech by my colleague and some comments that came across the floor.

I am a member of a Legion, as I believe is my colleague. When he made the comments about legions being points of service, with 1,461 offices across the country, the member for Scarborough—Agincourt, said that they are drinking offices. I think that shows a complete disrespect for the legions, the members of legions, the good work that they do, and for the great work that most of us are trying to do for veterans.

Therefore, I think he should apologize.

• (1610)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I thank the hon. member for his intervention.

In this particular case, I do not know what the blues demonstrate in terms of the member's comments. However, if it is as he described, I do not know that it would necessarily be in the realm of non-parliamentary language. Therefore, I do not think that in this case we have something that we will want to take any further.

Questions and comments. The hon. member for New Westminster—Coquitlam.

Mr. Fin Donnelly (New Westminster—Coquitlam, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I think all members of this House will agree that we need to support our veterans in this country. They fought for us, to defend the freedoms we enjoy in our country today.

However, not all veterans receive the support they so justly deserve. My mother-in-law served in the air force in the Second World War, but because she did not serve overseas, she does not qualify for support. I have spoken to ministers about this, and I have received the same response. They say that she does not qualify for support.

Now that the government is further eroding these services, closing veterans service centres across the country, I ask this of our hon. member who has spoken today and presented passionately.

Would it not be the right thing to do: to support this motion and reverse the decision to close these service centres, to provide support for our men and women in uniform who have given to this country, so that they can live out their lives with dignity?

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Mr. Speaker, indeed it would be essential for the government to reverse its decision. It is a bunch of bean-counters at work, talking about how much they can save so they can make themselves look good when it comes to budget time. They are not talking about human beings. They are not talking about our veterans or about the services we should be providing.

There is another point here. The legions have been mentioned. I am a proud member of the Duchess of Kent Legion in London, Ontario. There are all kinds of legions in the area: 427 Wing, Lambeth, Byron, and Victory Branch. All of them have dedicated what little resources they have to serving our veterans who have been abandoned by the government and by Veterans Affairs. They make sure that on Remembrance Day veterans are provided a meal and a trip to the cenotaph. They are taken care of by these legions, which offer the kinds of services or outreach not available anywhere else and that will be lost when these Veterans Affairs offices are closed. These legions cannot continue to do this forever. Their resources are limited. It is up to the people of Canada and the Government of Canada to lead the way, to make sure that our veterans are honoured, by providing the service, support, and dignity they have earned.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle (Rivière-du-Nord, NDP): Mr. Speaker, there is an old French song called *Tout va très bien Madame la Marquise*. The marquise, a noblewoman, is travelling and calls her castle, only to be told by her butler that her horse is dead. When she asks why, he responds that the barn caught fire. When she asks him why the barn caught fire, he says that the castle had caught fire, but not to worry, because everything was just fine.

Business of Supply

Veterans affairs is one file where everything is definitely not fine. Every year since I was elected, I have participated in Remembrance Day activities and I regularly meet UN-NATO veterans from the Laurentides and members of the Royal Canada Legion in Saint-Jérôme. I want to say a quick hello to them, since I know that they are listening.

On several occasions, I have met with these proud men and women who have recently returned from the front lines, where they were sent to fight for our freedoms and the values we believe in, and to protect democracy. I talked to them about the problems they have getting assistance from Veterans Affairs.

It is always overwhelming to see a massive, tattooed, 6-foot-3-inch man, bedecked with medals, who has come back from Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina or Afghanistan and who breaks down crying right in front of you. Why? Because he is suffering. I have witnessed a lot of suffering and worry among veterans, but I have also seen a lot of solidarity and people helping each other.

At a time when thousands of soldiers are or will be returning from their mission in Afghanistan, an unprecedented wave of suicides is sweeping the Canadian Forces. Clearly, they are now facing a significant mental health crisis. In the past two months, there have been eight suspected suicides in the Canadian Forces. I say "suspected" because these cases are still under investigation.

In the past five years, there have been 50 boards of inquiry on suspected cases of suicide, and some reports have not yet been released. Out of respect for the eight individuals who died, I will not mention their names. Suffice it to say that two of them were master corporals, one was a master bombardier, one was a warrant officer, one was a soldier and three were corporals.

Clearly, no one in the military is immune. What is happening here? The Surgeon General for the Canadian Forces does not believe that there is any connection between the suspected suicides and overseas missions. He even added that, "Suicide among Canadian Forces members is caused by the same factors as suicide among members of the general public". At least he had the decency to admit that overseas missions cause Canadian Forces members extreme stress.

Like all the members here today, I follow the news closely, and I have not noticed eight suicides in two months in any other occupational group in Canada where workers operate in conditions of extreme stress, such as firefighters, police officers, paramedics and nurses.

Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire gave an unequivocal response to the comments made by the Surgeon General: "I find it ridiculous that he is saying that the Canadian Forces do not have more suicides than the civilian world." He went on to say:

Do not tell me that when soldiers experience combat and are in a different environment over the holidays and are feeling isolated, that they are not more inclined to make a drastic decision.

Suicide is always a drastic decision, an immediate solution to a temporary problem. I am asking all members opposite to honestly recognize that we are experiencing a crisis and to accept the fact that the existing situation is not normal, that there is a deep malaise, and

that we need to take urgent measures to counteract this phenomenon and prevent any further loss of human life.

When they come back from Afghanistan, many of our soldiers will have to deal with symptoms of PTSD, and there is a chance that the number of suicides will increase. In spite of the recommendations made by the National Defence and Canadian Forces Ombudsman, the Department of National Defence has yet to create a national data base that would indicate exactly how many members of the military have PTSD-related issues. Between 6,000 and 10,000 members will be released from duty for medical reasons between 2011 and 2016.

●(1615)

Based on prevalence rates, it is estimated that 5,900 veterans will have mental health issues, 2,700 of them being serious cases of PTSD. The army's mental health needs are both clear and urgent. In recent months, this issue has been brought before two separate House of Commons committees. Veterans and veterans' advocates have spoken out against the lack of assistance provided to physically injured soldiers and those suffering from PTSD to transition back into civilian life.

Jason MacDonald, the Conservative government's spokesperson, reiterated that the army and the Department of Veterans Affairs are taking the suicides and the stress of current and former soldiers seriously. He said that the government is making every effort to support them. Is that really the case? How can the government say that it is taking this situation seriously when it is getting ready to close eight regional Veterans Affairs Canada offices between now and January 31? Those offices process 17,223 files. How can the government claim to be taking the situation and the Department of Veterans Affairs' allegations seriously when we know that it has slashed the Veterans Affairs Canada budget by \$129 million since 2011 and that additional cuts of \$132 million are planned for between now and 2016? A total of 784 positions are being cut, yet the government claims to be taking the situation seriously.

The government is closing offices that provide assistance to veterans and retired RCMP officers. They provide personalized, essential services for people with mental health issues. They provide personal crisis intervention and support so that older veterans can live independently. Veterans will have to go to other cities. They will have to travel eight, nine or ten hours to get front-line services, or they can get help through Service Canada offices, which will offer a hodge-podge of services. The employees who serve these veterans will not necessarily have a lot of real experience with the programs available to them.

Veterans will no longer have access to the specialized offices that were created for them in response to their needs. Those offices had private interview rooms for scheduled appointments with client service officers and case managers. There were other rooms where veterans could see nursing and other staff. For people considering putting an end to their lives, quick access to nearby resources can make a big difference as to whether they go through with it or not. Those resources will no longer be available in a timely fashion; they will no longer be available immediately.

Business of Supply

There is a staffing shortage. Soldiers will come back to the country in the midst of a staffing shortage. In 2003, the previous government promised to give National Defence 447 mental health workers. By December 2013, only 388 of those positions were occupied. According to the Ombudsman for the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, Pierre Daigle, one of the main concerns is the chronic shortage of mental health professionals, currently 15% to 22% below what is required by the Canadian Forces. This continues to be the biggest obstacle to the delivery of universal care to veterans.

We want the government to reverse its absurd decision to close regional Veterans Affairs Canada offices that provide front-line services to soldiers, immediately hire the mental health professionals that were promised to meet soldiers' and veterans' mental health needs, and prioritize and quickly conclude the over 50 outstanding boards of inquiry on military suicides so that grieving families can get answers to their questions.

• (1620)

Mr. Pierre Nantel (Longueuil—Pierre-Boucher, NDP): Mr. Speaker, first of all, I wish to congratulate my hon. colleague on his well-researched and very realistic speech regarding the situation facing former military personnel, veterans.

I visit the people of Royal Canadian Legion Branch 266 in Boucherville. How many times have they talked about the need for easily identifiable support when they think of their young colleagues returning from combat? The government makes a decision and then rolls it out, simply because they say that is the way it is going to go. We see the abuses. For instance, yesterday the media was reporting an appalling situation. If I put myself in the shoes of a young man returning from combat who sees how the government is treating those who have done so much for our country, I cannot help but think it is impossible to go on like this. On top of that, the Conservatives had the nerve to defer today's vote.

I would like to ask my colleague if he thinks the Conservatives are playing games with an extremely important subject.

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Mr. Speaker, what stands out the most about the way the Conservatives are dealing with this issue, and many others, is the lack of humanity.

There is a lack of humanity when it comes to the unemployed, veterans and immigrants, to name a few. When people are struggling, we need to be there for them, especially since these are employees of the government who were sent to fight for us.

We must ensure that when they come home, military personnel have access to all the services they need to lead an active and healthy life and reintegrate into civilian society.

The Conservative government did not have to cut the Veterans Affairs Canada budget by 10%, but that is what it decided to do. That is too bad. It says it is making budget cuts without any impact on services to Canadians, but here we have a good example of the opposite.

• (1625)

[English]

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I want to pick up on the fact that out of all of the offices that are

closing, there is one in the city of Brandon. As is the case with the other offices, this closing will have a profound impact.

I want to emphasize that there is a difference between calling a phone number and being able to walk into an office. We believe veterans deserve the respect of allowing these offices to remain open.

What transpired in the meeting with the vets the other day was exceptionally disrespectful. The following day we had a very heated question period dealing with the Minister of Veterans Affairs being called to task.

My own leader suggested that it is time for the minister to be relieved of his responsibilities as the minister responsible for veterans. My leader wanted the minister to resign. Not only was the leader of the Liberal Party calling for this, but the Leader of the Opposition was as well.

I wonder if the member might want to comment on the whole issue of respect and the need to replace the current minister.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Mr. Speaker, I completely agree with my colleague's statements.

The minister should resign in the wake of his unacceptable behaviour yesterday. The government cannot admit that though because he represents the government on this file and acts on its behalf. It is despicable that when veterans come to meet with the minister, he refuses to speak with them and literally pushes them. He should resign.

[English]

Mr. Murray Rankin (Victoria, NDP): Mr. Speaker, Raymond is a Victoria veteran. He is 93 years old and the last living member of a Lancaster bomber crew.

The closure of the Veterans Affairs offices has made it harder for Raymond to find out about the Bomber Command Bar. When Raymond's Bomber Command Bar was approved after many delays, there was absolutely no ceremony or even an officer to receive it from. It just showed up in the mail one day. His family was very upset. He felt disrespected, ignored, and bitter about the government.

Apparently the government believes that a 1-800 number and a computer are going to do the job. I ask my hon. colleague if he thinks that is the way to treat our veterans.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Dionne Labelle: Mr. Speaker, we are talking about post traumatic stress disorder and human interaction with people who served their country and who are having a hard time. Machines cannot replace direct contact with professionals. Clearly, that will not work.

If a person who is considering committing suicide phones this service and gets voice mail, that individual will not get help in making the best decision about protecting his or her life and getting the care needed.

Business of Supply

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): 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 Churchill, Aboriginal Affairs; the hon. member for Thunder Bay—Superior North, The Environment; the hon. member for Saanich—Gulf Islands, Natural Resources.

[*English*]

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am going to read from an article that appeared in *The Hill Times*, written by Michel Drapeau, a veterans lawyer. He stated:

The recent rise of suicides of Afghan veterans, which should have been predictable, has focused national attention to the despair and neglect faced by many of them. It has also drawn attention to the likelihood that the suicide rate amongst CF members is many times higher than the Canadian statistical norm. This is supported in a Statistics Canada report, which found that among CF members, 26.6 per cent of the male deaths and 14 per cent of female deaths were the result of suicide. This same report states that individuals with some military career experience are 45 per cent more likely to die as a result of suicide than those in the general population.

In the last few weeks leading up to this past Christmas, there were eight suicides. There was another death that was confirmed as a suicide yesterday, making it nine suicides. That is a number that is very high.

There are people suffering with post traumatic stress disorder. There are people suffering with all kinds of ailments. There are people suffering with broken bones, bad backs, and everything else.

When these people joined the military and were asked to do things, they did not hesitate. The military is not a nine-to-five career. The military is not a career where if something is unsafe one says, "No, I'm not going to do it." The military is quite the opposite. It is 9:01 a.m. to 8:59 a.m. the next morning. If one is asked to do something, one has to do it.

Let us go back in history and our involvement to when Canada became known as a country in Vimy Ridge in 1917, when we charged the bastions and we won. That was World War I. Thousands upon thousands of young men joined up. Some of them were as young as 15. They had to lie about their age in order to join the military.

In 1917, just prior to the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Conservative Prime Minister Robert Borden stated that:

You can go into this action feeling assured of this, and as the head of the government I give you this assurance: That you need not fear that the government and the country will fail to show just appreciation of your service to the country and Empire in what you are about to do and what you have already done. The government and the country will consider it their first duty to see that a proper appreciation of your effort and of your courage is brought to the notice of people at home...that no man, whether he goes back or whether he remains in Flanders, will have just cause to reproach the government for having broken faith with the men who won and the men who died.

Borden's speech was the promise and the moral recognition that Canada and the Government of Canada would never forget the sacrifice its veterans and their families make. This promise formed the basis of Canada's legislation to support our veterans. That was right after World War II.

The Pension Act that was enacted did not come about very easily. Yes, there were riots in the street. Yes, there was trouble. Yes, there was fighting, and yes, the veterans felt that they were left behind.

However, after World War II, a Pension Act was enacted that provided for the payment of pensions to veterans, to veterans who were taken prisoner by the enemy, to the surviving dependants of all such veterans, and to veterans who were killed or disabled in the course of their military service.

Section 2 of the act states:

The provisions of this Act shall be liberally construed and interpreted to the end that the recognized obligation of the people and Government of Canada to provide compensation to those members of the forces who have been disabled or have died as a result of military service, and to their dependants, may be fulfilled.

That was World War I, the war to end all wars. Unfortunately, that was not the case. A few years later, in 1940, there was another war. However, before we get to 1940, Canadians were again asked to join up, and men and women joined up. We sacrificed not only in battle but we sacrificed at home.

• (1630)

In 1930, there was the War Veterans Allowance Act, which was enacted to provide for special income support benefits to veterans in need. Section 1.01 states:

The provisions of this Act shall be liberally construed and interpreted to the end that the recognized obligation of the people and Government of Canada to those who have served their country so well and to their dependants may be fulfilled.

Over the years, the Pension Act and the War Veterans Allowance Act have been amended to include members who have served in World War II, the Korean War, and members of the Merchant Marine. We had the Canadian Forces Members and Veterans Re-establishment and Compensation Act, and then we come to 2005, when we have the new veterans charter.

However, before we get to 2005 and the changes that we have seen through the new veterans charter, we have to look at the history of what our military has done.

In the Korean War, we fought under a UN flag. The UN flag was for us to fight North Korea, where difficulties still exist to this very day. We have seen action in Cyprus, the Middle East, the Golan Heights, and Vietnam. These were peacekeeping actions. We have seen NATO actions and the Cold War. We have seen all kinds of action, and the men and women who served in those theatres, although not in actual war, were there as peacekeepers. This is what put Canada on the map. When Canadians who travel abroad are asked where they are from and say "Canada", the first thing that comes to people's minds is that we are a nation of peacekeeping, a nation that fights for freedom, and a nation that supports other nations at times of need.

One of the supports that we also provide at a time of disaster, such as after the tsunami in Sri Lanka, after the earthquakes in Muzaffarabad, Kashmir, Haiti, Turkey, and most recently in the Philippines, is what is called DART. Successive Canadian governments are very eager to assist countries and offer DART, and the DART team goes in. The men and women of DART are there to provide support and help the people of a country get back on their feet. Usually deployment of the team is two to three months at most, and they provide special services and assistance.

Business of Supply

I had the pleasure and opportunity to see DART at work in Sri Lanka, as well as in Pakistan. In Sri Lanka, it was right after the tsunami. I visited DART and I saw doctors and nurses, men and women, working on young people and older men and women who were hurt from the tsunami. In Pakistan, I met a doctor who was originally from Pakistan and spoke the Urdu language. He was a Canadian doctor with the military. He would wear his backpack, which was full of medical supplies and other medical equipment, and go up into the mountains to provide service to the people who could not come down the mountains to go to the hospital.

Now we come to the action in Afghanistan. In 2001-2002, Canada got involved in Afghanistan. A lot of men and women have come back from that action. It is said that if they got hurt but could get into Kandahar within two minutes, their lives would probably be saved. However, we lost about 158 personnel, and many were wounded and maimed.

The difference in this situation is that the men and women who came back from Afghanistan after 2006 are having to deal with the NVC, the new veterans charter. Although the NVC has a lot of positives, it also has a lot of negatives. It depends on who one talks to. A lot of people are saying that the new veterans charter, which is supposed to be a living charter, is something that we need to look at, update, and explore. We are in the process of doing that. If people get hurt or maimed, the new veterans charter provides a lump sum. A lot of personnel and veterans who served are very upset, and in one case the government is being taken to court.

Let us take a look at the new veterans charter. I mentioned the words “liberally construed and interpreted to the end that the recognized obligation of the people and Government of Canada”.

• (1635)

However, section 43 on the benefit of the doubt states:

In making a decision under this Part or under section 84, the Minister and any person designated under section 67 shall

- (a) draw from the circumstances of the case, and any evidence presented to the Minister or person; every reasonable inference in favour of an applicant under this Part or under section 84;
- (b) accept any uncontradicted evidence presented to the Minister or the person, by the applicant, that the Minister or person considers to be credible in the circumstances; and
- (c) resolve in favour of the applicant any doubt, in the weighing of the evidence, as to whether the applicant has established a case.

All members of the House voted in favour of the NVC. We did so because the main objective of the charter is to foster the social and vocational re-establishment of veterans in Canadian society at large. Unfortunately, I was one of those people who voted for it. We were convinced at that time, but we were wrong, and the NVC has become a barrier for many veterans who have come home either physically or mentally injured.

The death and disability lump sum payments are woefully inadequate when compared to the payments received by claimants under the WSIB program or by court-ordered settlements for personal injury claimants. One veteran wrote to me saying that he had lost 5% of his brain in an IED attack in Afghanistan and because there was no mention of disability or dismemberment on his chart, he will receive nothing for his injury.

I asked the minister's office for the number of cases initially denied by Veterans Affairs Canada; how many of them were appealed to the Veterans Review and Appeal Board; and how many had been successful. I am still waiting for an answer after more than five months.

Let me paraphrase several veterans: “I don't mind fighting the enemy but I should not have to fight the government that sent me to war to get the benefits I have earned”.

A veteran wrote more specifically, “Soldiers do their work, come home to fight another battle. Many believe that their government will look after them but obviously we were wrong. The battles that we have at home hurt more than those that we fought in other parts of the world. Government believes that soldiers are expendable. I can go to court for years. In the meantime, soldiers and their families die. Governments do not lose. It is amazing that we as citizens that are willing to die for the country knowing full well that some politicians will play their games and look like fools. We have given millions, maybe billions of our tax dollars to other countries and shake hands with a devil, but we will not fight us using more taxpayers to that end. Too bad. So sad. I love my country but...”.

Six brave veterans have taken the Conservative government to court to get the benefits that they feel they and their brothers and sisters in arms are entitled to. They are supported by the Equitas Society. Government lawyers went to court and they presented their case. When Mr. Justice Weatherill of the Supreme Court of British Columbia asked, “Is a better way of doing it the same thing as we want to save money?”, the government lawyer answered, “There is absolutely no question that government is entitled to trim allocations if they feel there is a need to save money”. The government lawyer went on to say, “And if there is a complaint about it...the remedy is at the polls”. He continued, “Yes, the benefits, for the purpose of this motion, are conceded to have been more generous under the Pension Act. Yes, government has changed the benefit package, and there appear...to be disadvantages, economic disadvantage that flow from that”. The government lawyer all but admitted that the changes in compensation offered under the NVC were to save money.

Closing the nine Veterans Affairs Canada centres and laying off 89 case workers is part of the Conservative government's workplace adjustment. It is balancing the books on the backs of our veterans. However, it is a case of false economy.

There are nine district offices set for closure. The files from Corner Brook will most likely go to St. John's. It is an eight-hour drive from Corner Brook to St. John's. The Sydney files will more likely go to Halifax, a five- to six-hour drive. The files in the Charlottetown office will likely go to Campbellton or Halifax, a five- to seven-hour drive for both. The files in Thunder Bay will likely go to Winnipeg, which involves a nine- to ten-hour drive. The Windsor files will likely go to London, a 2.5-hour drive. Saskatoon files will likely go to Regina, a three-hour drive.

Business of Supply

● (1640)

For Brandon, the files would probably go to Shilo, which is a 30- to 45-minute drive, or as we learned when the vets from Brandon were here, they were thinking that the files would probably go to Winnipeg, an hour-and-a-half to two-hour drive. For Prince George, the files are dealt with by Vancouver, or Penticton. That is a 10-hour drive to Vancouver and 8-hour drive to Penticton.

Government members will say there is a Service Canada office there. In that case, I would challenge any of them to phone Dennis Manuge, who took the government to court and won. He tells me he has to drive to Penticton. He is in Kelowna. The files would likely go to Penticton, an hour away.

Let us examine what service managers do versus Service Canada workers. Veterans Affairs workers receive specialized, ongoing training because Veterans Affairs services and programs, like the needs of the veterans, are vastly complex and always evolving. Service Canada workers have received limited training about Veterans Affairs services and programs and can only answer general questions, in addition to supplying and receiving forms. They would direct the veterans to go a phone and either dial the number for VAC centre, which is 1-866-522-2122, or use the computer. I did that and I have a screen capture of it here that says: “Service Canada—People serving people”. It shows contact information and gives that number, which is the Veterans Affairs number.

I am going to look at three of the offices the government is trying to close. Charlottetown has 2,135 veterans that it looks after. Sydney has 1,485 and Thunder Bay has 1,048. A lot of vets who are suffering from PTSD go to VAC centres.

I have a letter from Gordon Hockridge, which reads:

My dance with the devil.

I've come close to suicide a few times but never this close. The thought of my wife and kids have always ached my attempting suicide. But not this time. I ignited a firestorm last Saturday and it ended up with me sitting in front of my computer with a 45.70 in my hands. The mental pain was building all day Sunday, everything was out of control, I couldn't shake the pain.

This veteran tried to call the number at the VAC centre. It was Saturday and it was closed. A recording said that if this was an emergency, dial 911 or go to the closest hospital.

There was a challenge put out and the vets themselves came about and put in an emergency line. They have a number. It is 855-373-8387. It is manned 24/7. A vet in distress calling that number will reach another vet answering that call. He has been there. He has done that. He knows what PTSD is all about. He knows what the trigger points are and he can help. Gord was one of those people who called that number and he was helped.

Having caseworkers driving 10 hours is totally unacceptable.

Mr. Speaker, I know you are signalling me that I only have two minutes left. I could go on for hours, but I will end up with this. One veteran told me that he had paid four visits to two Service Canada centres and was told by the Service Canada staff that they could not help him. Should a veteran live in a community that does not have a Service Canada location, dialing the 1-800 number is even more frustrating. One veteran told me that he got so frustrated with pressing 1 or 2 that he put the phone down. It is extremely frustrating

for someone who suffers from post traumatic stress disorder. They usually end up just hanging on. That is not the way to help our veterans.

Mr. Speaker, I seek the permission of the House to dial the Veterans Affairs number now on my cellphone, just to see what they say. It is after 4:30. Do I have permission?

● (1645)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Does the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt have unanimous consent of the House to use a device in the Chamber?

Some hon. members: No.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Speaker, it is because they know that as soon as we dial that number and that number goes live and is heard across the country, what we will hear after 4:30 is “Thank you for dialing. If this is an emergency dial 911, or go to the closest hospital”.

There was a headline in the *National Post* that read “Veterans learning what Caledonia residents already know—[the minister] is a bully”.

The article closes:

In his first six months on the job, he zipped off to Paris to give a speech at an international meeting, was in Korea for the 60th anniversary of the armistice...

Those veterans who were blown off by Mr. Fantino paid in their taxes (and with their service)—

● (1650)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. I would just remind the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt that the use of the names of other hon. members or ministers is prohibited. We use the name of either their title or their riding.

In the same vein, there have been, through the course of the debate, some characterizations of individual members and/or a minister, and these kinds of adjectives that are applied to specific members are usually in the category of unparliamentary language. I did note in this case that there did not seem to be any disorder, but I just mention that as a caution for members to steer clear from that kind of characterization.

We are at questions and comments. The hon. member for Toronto—Danforth.

Mr. Craig Scott (Toronto—Danforth, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank my colleague for his speech on this motion by my colleague from Châteauguay—Saint-Constant, which I very much support.

Business of Supply

This is something very close to my heart. My own grandfather served in World War I. For many years I have worn this ring. He lost his leg on a battlefield in northern France. He survived many surgeries after the war, until he finally committed suicide in 1938, at which time his surviving spouse, my grandmother, was told she was entitled to only half a pension because of the manner in which he had taken his life. So I know exactly what it means to talk about ensuring that their government, when they come home, is fully on the veterans' side.

With that, I would like to ask my hon. colleague what he knows or thinks about some reports that the inability of the Department of National Defence to hire staff to be mental health workers supposedly comes down to its deficit reduction policies, such that in order to hire a mental health worker, someone else would have to be fired within the Department of National Defence. Has the member heard that, and could he comment?

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Speaker, there have been reports that the 50 or so positions that are about to be filled are not being filled because of office politics football.

I know personally that a lot of the people who are suffering are reaching out to many of us and wanting to speak. This is why the vets took it upon themselves and have set up a 1-800 number. I will repeat the number for whoever is listening: 1-855-373-VETS, which is 8387. Vets call upon vets and get help. We need more clinicians to assist, and it is a real shame that the government is not moving in the direction of providing people with the assistance they need.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Mr. Speaker, on the heels of comments by the member across the way—"Giving somebody a lump sum...that's like hanging a case of beer in front of a drunk.... They get the lump sum, they go and spend it, either trying to buy a house or buying a fast car or spending it on booze or addiction", or, "A lot of the veterans were in the army. We taught them one skill, to kill or be killed, to survive in order to be able to kill tomorrow, if I can put it bluntly"—it comes as no surprise that today in the House he says that legions are no more than drinking offices.

I take quite an exception to that because a number of our legions do very good work, not only for soldiers who have served in the past but also through other forms of community involvement.

Our serving soldiers do have, through OSISS, access to the members' assistance line 24/7, which is 1-800-268-7708. It is manned with qualified medical personnel. The families as well as reservists and the members themselves can call the family info line at 1-800-866-4546.

So instead of grandstanding with some off-the-cuff line that the member has put together to get publicity for himself, why is he not giving information on the scores of programs available to our people who have served in Canada's armed forces on behalf of Canadians?

•(1655)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Speaker, if I am not mistaken, of the nine service people who have committed suicide, one or two of them might have been from Petawawa, which is in her riding.

If one dials 411 and asks directory assistance for the 1-800 number for Veterans Affairs, one will get 866-522-2122. I challenge

anyone in this House, at this very moment, to dial that number. The answer will be: "We're closed, and if this is an emergency, dial 911".

This is what the Conservative government is doing. After 4:30 p. m., they shut the number down, thank you very much and goodbye.

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, my colleague for Cardigan asked the minister a question during question period. The minister answered what my colleague just said: Dial the 1-800 number. That is not adequate. What we are talking about here is the loss of services to veterans.

In today's Charlottetown paper, *The Guardian*, there is an article about two Veterans Affairs caseworkers handling files from Charlottetown, and they say that they are completely overwhelmed by the workload. They are not working in Charlottetown now.

Ms. Bradley, the employee, outlined how bad she felt, because she could not provide adequate services, since she has 1,100 files. I will quote what she said:

We've already taken on files from the Charlottetown office. The impact that I have seen already is that the wait times are increasing for veterans. They are waiting weeks for phone calls back. We just don't have the time to service them the way the Charlottetown office did.

I ask my colleague what kinds of measures have to be taken to overcome this difficulty the cutbacks by the Minister of Veterans Affairs are causing for the reality veterans calling in for help have to face.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Speaker, I looked at the list of offices and the amount of work they are doing, and the case officers and the veterans they are servicing. In Charlottetown alone, I see the number 2,138. If it is not the busiest office, it is one of the busiest offices. To close that office in Charlottetown and take it to Halifax is a real shame.

Although the minister was there a couple of weeks ago, and he hastily called a meeting with the veterans at the very last minute to reassure them, well, the figures speak for themselves.

Not only that, veterans from across the country wanting to see the minister, to look him in the eye to say that he should not be closing their services, came to this House. The minister asked for a meeting with them, and he did not show up. There were two members of Parliament, the parliamentary secretary, and his chief of staff, and they blew the veterans completely aside.

The veterans came downstairs to the Charles-Lynch theatre in order to hold a press conference. At the very last minute, the minister blew in and said, don't point your finger at me. Well, that is not the way to deal with veterans. This is not the way to deal with people we have asked to put their lives on the line.

Business of Supply

The minister gets up and says that we are going to wash their windows, clear the snow, and cut their grass. Maybe the Prime Minister should fire that minister, let him become the minister, and the rest of us can go cut his grass, shovel his snow, and clean his windows. There is more to it than—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Questions and comments, the hon. member for Mississauga East—Cooksville.

Mr. Wladyslaw Lizon (Mississauga East—Cooksville, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I listened to the member's speech very carefully. He made some historical references to Prime Minister Borden's speech, but he chose the facts very carefully.

My question during this debate earlier today was this: Has he had some of kind of transformation in recent years? He portrays himself as a defender of veterans, but he and other members who sit with him were part of the government that in 1995 introduced the deepest cuts to veterans in this country's history. The Liberals removed veterans' benefits from Allied veterans, including those who fought under Canadian command.

What were veterans told? They were told that they were wearing the wrong uniform. They may have been under Canadian command, but they were not wearing a Canadian uniform. Canadian veterans were outraged.

They removed the veterans' benefits from so-called—

• (1700)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. The time for questions and comments, of course, is a limited time, and we need some opportunity for the hon. member for Scarborough—Agincourt to respond.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Speaker, when the Conservatives came back into government, I got a call from one of the members saying that they were restoring the Allied veterans.

Mr. Konn, an allied veteran from my riding who fought for us, went to ask for funds, and the minister's office called back and said that sorry, he was not one of ours.

At least we did the honourable thing by saying that we were only going to give to the veterans who fought for Canada. We did not mislead the veterans. They knew what they were looking for. I even know the country the member is talking about, because I come from that country. When people lined up in Crete and had falsified documents, the government of the day had to do something to make sure that people did not line up and get funds they were not allowed to, because they provided falsified documents.

Go and get your facts straight—

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. Resuming debate, the hon. member for Abitibi—Témiscamingue.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to the motion moved by the hon. member for Châteauguay—Saint-Constant. I want to point out that if there is any time left over, I will share it with the hon. member for Windsor West.

Some members in the House know that I used to be a soldier. I enlisted on May 11, 2002, as a medical assistant in the reserves. Then I spent some time in the regular forces as an armour officer cadet.

Having been a soldier has changed me as a person. It has forever changed my personality. I was no longer the same person when I left the forces. I learned how to work on a team, even if I did not always like the people I was required to work with. I had to work with them nonetheless. I learned to take responsibility even though it was not always easy and even though I was tired at times. I learned that there is no one to blame but me. I learned that sometimes I have to accept that I am wrong and take responsibility for my mistakes instead of blaming everyone else for my problems.

I learned to manage my fear and stress. As soldiers, we do not learn how to overcome fear; we learn how to manage it. If we lose our fear, then we become reckless and that can be fatal. I learned to push my limits and exceed them. All those skills have made me a different person. I would say that the majority of veterans also learned to be different.

It is often said, once a soldier always a soldier. It is true. The people we served with will always be our brothers and sisters. The Canadian flag will always have a special meaning for us. Every day for the rest of our lives, our national anthem, *O Canada*, will stir up certain emotions. Maybe that is why I am so proud to sing it every Wednesday. Even though I do not have such a great singing voice, I love singing our national anthem.

There is something else that is different about us. Even if soldiers do not believe in the politics of a mission—we agree that soldiers have political opinions—we still want to go because we do not want to let our brothers and sisters go alone. We want to participate even if, in the end, we do not believe the political reasons the people we serve under have given for the mission.

We help and support one another. I remember that, when I was a soldier, even though I weighed only 110 pounds—I will not say how much I weigh now, but at the time I was quite petite—I grabbed a second rucksack and carried it because one of my colleagues was injured. I walked with two rucksacks. Even though they weighed approximately 60 to 80 pounds each, I did it. Another time, I took a C9 machine gun, which is a heavier weapon, and I gave my much lighter gun to an injured colleague. I wanted him to carry a lighter load.

We take care of one another. Even when the problems are psychological, we try to support one another as best we can. However, it is problematic when too many people have mental health issues and are suffering. Someone who is injured and hurting cannot help his or her colleagues as much. There is an imbalance and that is when there is a problem.

Business of Supply

The number of disturbing stories I have heard is nevertheless surprising. A colleague told me that he saw a river in Rwanda that was red with blood and had corpses floating in it. He will carry those images with him for the rest of his life. I also heard about Yugoslavia. A colleague took down bodies that had been nailed to a wall. That too stays with you for the rest of your life. People have told me about unimaginable injuries, smells that will stay with them forever. All those images stay in your mind. Why did they tell me about them? Maybe because they thought that I could understand, that I would know what they were experiencing and that I would be able to listen without judging.

Canadian Forces members often talk about why they joined the military, but they do not often talk about why they left.

• (1705)

Today, I am going to talk about those reasons. I would like to say that all of our men and women in uniform are truly wonderful people who are dedicated to their duty. I have nothing bad to say about any of the people in uniform I served with.

However, after being assigned to the holding platoon for various reasons, I realized that the managers and administrators who do not wear a uniform are sometimes—and I would even go so far as to say often—out of touch with the reality and the practical needs of the people on the ground. At the time, I was an officer cadet, but I told myself that I would not be able to give explanations to the soldiers. When a soldier would come and see me to ask why his medical file had been on hold for over a year, I would be unable to explain to him why the government had not taken action.

At first, I wanted to stay, but I finally decided to leave the armed forces. The first thing I did after I left, in December 2005, was to run in the federal election as the NDP candidate for the riding of Abitibi—Témiscamingue. It was one of the first things I did. I decided that I was going to fight for my former brothers and sisters, that I was going to try to make a difference for them. I decided to fight for the things that are important to me, to fight for my home region and for the people who watched me grow up. I am very happy to do so. It is a different way of fighting, but it is just as important.

Soldiers are taught how to fight and to go to war. They become experts in this area. However, they are not taught how to fight with words against public servants who force them to fill out an endless number of forms and go through countless processes. Veterans have said that they get the impression that they are at war against their government.

It is unbelievable. They are experiencing mental anguish because of all the horrific images they have in their minds from the atrocities they have witnessed. However, when they ask for help, all the government seems to want to do is undermine them; put obstacles in their way; and think nothing of sending them here, there and everywhere in search of documents.

They are told to find help online or on the phone. It is already hard to talk about what they went through in person, to someone they know or to their loved ones. It is already hard to speak to a sympathetic-looking person, and now they are being told that they will have to try talking about their emotions online or on the phone. That makes no sense. If they manage to get professional help, there

is a good chance that this professional will be tired and worn out because there are never as many professionals as are needed.

In light of this, is it so surprising that the stress is causing some people to commit suicide? The minister does not think it is right to link the suicides to the closing of the centres. I do not think it is right that the Conservatives are not asking whether closing these centres will increase the risk of psychological stress and suicide. That is not right, and the minister needs to put a stop to this.

We ask soldiers to be brave and to fight. We asked soldiers not to be afraid to give their life for their country. However, now, Conservative members are unable to rise and are all too afraid to tell the Prime Minister and the Minister of Veterans Affairs that this is not the right thing to do. Is that it? Do they lack the honour to be able to say that?

It is unacceptable, and that is why I believe that all members should adopt the NDP's motion. They should all say that no, we will not abandon our veterans.

• (1710)

[*English*]

Hon. Wayne Easter (Malpeque, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, while the member spoke about how the military changed her, I felt I wanted to applaud at that point. There are other people from the military, and all parties here, feel the same way. That sense of pride and appreciation for the military that she showed in her remarks is really commendable, and I want to say that at the beginning.

The member talked a fair bit about the difficulty of calling a government number, or even talking to an individual, and getting the response to go on the Internet or call another number. I came out of the farm movement. There were some very tough times in the eighties, and we had farm stress hotlines to prevent suicides. When those calls are made, when people are under stress, regardless of the occupation, and especially so in the military, there has to be a live person at the other end. There absolutely must be.

I ask if the hon. member could express more about the difficulty and the stress of being one of those individuals making a call for help and not getting an adequate response?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore: Mr. Speaker, it is already hard enough to ask for help, to admit that you are not doing well and to talk about your experiences with another person face to face, even if that person has listened to others and understands military issues.

Now, imagine suffering that much. You are not even able to talk to someone in person, and when you call you hear, "For English, please press 1; *Pour le français, appuyez sur le 2.*" It is already hard enough. That does not make sense.

When people are in distress and are thinking about dying, they are rarely able to talk about what they went through with their spouse, for example. It is too hard and they do not want to make their loved ones sad by talking about their experiences.

Government Orders

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

[English]

RESPECT FOR COMMUNITIES ACT

It is ridiculous that we are not even able to ensure that someone will directly answer their call. The person in distress could hang up. They would have gathered their courage to phone, but as soon as they heard the recorded message, they would give up. They will no longer be able to talk and will hang up, and it may be too late to help ease their suffering.

• (1715)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): It being 5:15 p.m. it is my duty to interrupt the proceedings and put forthwith every question necessary to dispose of the business of supply.

The question is on the motion.

Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): In my opinion, the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Call in the members.
[English]

Hon. John Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I would request that the vote be deferred until Monday.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Accordingly, the recorded division is deferred until Monday at the end of government orders.

Order, please. I see the chief government whip rising on a point.

Hon. John Duncan: Mr. Speaker, I would be content to see the clock at 5:30.

• (1720)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Is there unanimous consent to see the clock at 5:30?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

SUSPENSION OF SITTING

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Accordingly the House will stand suspended until 5:30 p.m.

(The sitting of the House was suspended at 5:18 p.m.)

SITTING RESUMED

(The House resumed at 5:21 p.m.)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. We will call orders of the day.

The House resumed from January 27 consideration of the motion that Bill C-2, An Act to amend the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, be read the second time and referred to a committee, and of the motion that the question be now put.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux (Winnipeg North, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to get the opportunity to speak to Bill C-2. We are somewhat surprised that the bill has actually been called at this time, as we had anticipated that we would be into a recess. I understand if it is the will of the chamber to pass the bill.

I am not quite sure if I have already spoken to the bill at this stage. Would you get confirmation from the table, Mr. Speaker? I would not want to be speaking twice on this particular bill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We will get confirmation for the hon. member for Winnipeg North, and we will take up that question momentarily.

Until we verify that, perhaps the hon. member would wish to continue his remarks.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, please. As it turns out, the hon. member's intuition was correct. Indeed, he has already had the opportunity to speak to the bill at this stage.

I see the hon. member for Halifax West rising.

Hon. Geoff Regan: Mr. Speaker, I am prepared to speak to the bill.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): We just called orders of the day. We are starting on Bill C-2. Between me and the table, we are trying to get situated in terms of which party was next on the list on resuming debate.

Indeed, at this point on resuming debate, the next slot up is a Conservative slot, so we will resume debate with the next Conservative speaker.

This is Bill C-2 on the previous question. Accordingly, when we first recognized the hon. member for Winnipeg North, he had already spoken at this stage of the bill, so we will go to the next speaking slot, which is the Conservatives. Resuming debate, the hon. member for Kootenay—Columbia.

Mr. David Wilks: Mr. Speaker—

• (1725)

Hon. Wayne Easter: Mr. Speaker, I believe the member has already spoken. If you check the record, you will know for sure. I know he asked enough questions that he could have spoken about ten times. They were all reasonable questions.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): I appreciate the intervention on the part of the hon. member for Malpeque. Indeed, we will in fact do that. As I did with the member for Winnipeg North, we will let the member for Kootenay—Columbia continue until we have verified that.

Private Members' Business

He has spoken already. That being the case, the hon. member for Winnipeg North on a point of order.

Mr. Kevin Lamoureux: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, I think maybe if you attempt to recanvass the House, you might find the will to see the clock at 5:30 p.m. so that we can get into the private members' hour, possibly.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): Order, order. We are losing control here, or at least I am. We can only deal with one point of order at a time. We have had another member suggest that if we sought it, we might have the unanimous consent of the House to see the clock at 5:30 p.m.

Do we have the unanimous consent of the House to see the clock at 5:30 p.m.?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Bruce Stanton): The House will now proceed to the consideration of private members' business as listed on today's order paper.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

[English]

INCOME TAX ACT

The House resumed from October 31, 2013, consideration of the motion that Bill C-201, an Act to amend the Income Tax Act (travel and accommodation deduction for tradespersons), be read the second time and referred to a committee.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise today to speak to Bill C-201, which would provide skilled trades workers with a tax deduction for certain work-related travel and accommodations.

I will be supporting this bill at second reading, so that it can move forward and be examined more thoroughly by the House of Commons finance committee.

Bill C-201 would help skilled tradespeople with the costs of travelling to work. It might help address some of the regional skills shortages that exist in Canada. This is an important issue, with a thriving construction industry being a vital source of good, well-paying, middle-class jobs. It is important that we do what we can to support these workers and their families.

Large parts of the construction industry are involved in short- to medium-term projects, and skilled tradespeople are often required to travel or temporarily relocate for work. In my part of the country and throughout Atlantic Canada we have a lot of workers and tradespeople who travel to other parts of the country to work for periods of time and then return to their families and make money in the meantime, which helps pay their mortgage, their family costs, and expenses in their homes in places like Hants County and Kings County of Nova Scotia. However, among construction workers, the cost of relocating is cited as a significant impediment to labour mobility. Not only would this bill provide tradespeople with some relief from the costs of relocating for work, but it would also provide them with a financial benefit that they or members of their family

could spend in their home community, which would help support their local economies at home, such as in places like Kings—Hants.

By helping skilled tradespeople with the costs of travelling to work, Bill C-201 could also help address these regional skill shortages and potentially help to increase Canada's productivity. However, there are some important questions surrounding this bill that have yet to be answered, especially regarding the costs. I would hope the finance committee will be able to study the costs of implementing this kind of measure, once the bill has passed at second reading. It is important for parliamentarians to know how much legislation will actually cost before we make final decisions. As parliamentarians, we have a fiduciary responsibility to our citizens and Canadian taxpayers to fully understand the impacts on the fiscal framework in Canada of our decisions and the legislation we pass.

In the first hour of debate on the bill, the member for Hamilton Mountain estimated that approximately 160,000 construction workers in Canada could benefit from the tax credit in Bill C-201 at a cost of \$84 million per year to the federal treasury. Then she estimated that when we consider economic spinoffs and potentially reduced EI payouts, the government could actually save \$167 million per year under Bill C-201. On the other hand, the parliamentary secretary to the revenue minister argued that Bill C-201 would cost the treasury approximately \$60 million per year at maturity. Therefore, there is a wide disparity in the numbers being cited in terms of what this would cost or potentially save taxpayers.

In cases where private member's bills are expected to have significant costs or impact on the fiscal framework, the finance committee in the past has asked the PBO to calculate what that fiscal impact would be before a second reading vote. However, the PBO has not been able to estimate the fiscal impact of this particular bill. The PBO told my office that it had tried to estimate the costs of this bill but could not. This is why. It stated:

There was not sufficient detail in the bill around the definition of trades persons nor around the details of what constituted travel for the purposes of commuting or for the purposes of relocating, nor was there sufficient data from stats can to allow any meaningful costing of this bill.

Therefore, it appears that Bill C-201 is still lacking details that are essential to providing a meaningful cost estimate, and the PBO has said that its office is having difficulty costing it because of that lack of granularity.

● (1730)

Still that is no reason, necessarily, to throw out the baby with the bathwater on this one, because there still may be some positives in the intentions to provide some level of support to skilled tradespeople and their families, and an opportunity for us to do this. We at the finance committee, perhaps, can pass some clarifying amendments that can help address some of these concerns, can better define "skilled tradespeople" exactly in terms of how we would constitute it for this application, and also more clearly define "relocation" or "commuting expense" so we can actually cost the bill and the PBO can actually cost it.

Another area where we have some questions is around the distance a worker must travel to qualify for a tax deduction. Bill C-201 proposes that a skilled tradesperson would qualify for this tax deduction if the worker travels at least 80 kilometres for work. The threshold of 80 kilometres may result in a large proportion of the benefit potentially going to daily commuters in the Toronto area or other metropolitan areas, workers for whom this credit is not necessarily intended.

For instance, workers who commute between Barrie and Toronto travel 96 kilometres each way, and those who commute between Guelph and Toronto would travel 95 kilometres each way. We would want to have this discussion. Is that the intention of this bill? Perhaps it is, but I am saying that there may be some definitions of what defines appropriately a commute for financial benefit considered under this bill. These are areas where there are good roads, infrastructure, strong or reasonable public transit, which help to facilitate a daily commute more so than that which would exist in other areas of Canada that do not have the same highly evolved infrastructure. Therefore, the finance committee may want to consider establishing different thresholds, depending on geography and infrastructure, instead of having one across-the-board threshold when it comes to how far people must travel to qualify for this benefit.

We may want to look at examples from other jurisdictions. As I mentioned before, a thriving construction industry in Canada is an important source of good jobs and incomes for Canadian middle class families, and we can no doubt all talk about individual stories of workers who have travelled great distances for work. I know in my father's case he was not in the construction trade but he drove 52 miles from Cheverie to downtown Halifax every day for work, for decades. Today, I know the local construction workers in my home community of Cheverie drive into Halifax every single day on sometimes terrible roads in awful conditions in the middle of winter, leaving their homes at 5 a.m., driving home in the evenings, leaving before dawn and getting home after dark, and piling into cars with their lunch boxes and their thermoses and their gear ready to go to work, driving over these rough roads in terrible conditions, every single day from Cheverie, Bramber, Walton, Scotch Village, and all our local communities.

Part of the discussions around this bill will enable us to talk to the people in our own communities who commute long distances every day, and particularly people in skilled trades whom we need to support in any way we can. I appreciate the challenges facing the construction industry in areas where there are serious labour shortages, but we need to ensure this bill is targeted in such a way that it actually addresses those issues.

Improving labour mobility in Canada would lead to greater productivity and more prosperity for Canadians. At the same time, we must be careful not to drive a critical mass of young Canadians out of economically disadvantaged communities that need them. We have to monitor this and we have to craft public policy carefully.

• (1735)

Canada is experiencing very uneven economic growth. There is a strong connection between our growing provinces and the existence of natural resources. We need national strategies around the

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extractive sector in oil and gas and the related construction industry if we are going to ensure that the prosperity is shared across Canada and enjoyed by all Canadians, regardless of where they are from.

This bill could perhaps help to address some of those inequities and help young Canadians see some of those opportunities. However, we will have to delve into those details on a more granular basis at the House of Commons finance committee.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Anne Minh-Thu Quach (Beauharnois—Salaberry, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to such an important issue for tradespeople across the country.

The bill introduced by the hon. member for Hamilton Mountain would allow skilled workers to deduct from their taxable income travel and accommodation expenses. It would also allow them to maintain employment at a construction site that is more than 80 kilometres from their home.

This is a much-needed bill. Tradespeople are the engine of our economy. Construction is the biggest private sector industry in the country. It boasts 17,000 companies and employs a million Canadians. It creates more than 12% of our gross domestic product.

Skilled tradespeople include heavy equipment operators, electricians, welders, carpenters and so on. These workers are essential on construction sites. It is impossible to do the work without them.

However, the trades are facing significant challenges, including a shortage of workers and workforce mobility issues.

The Conference Board of Canada estimates that Canada will need at least a million more skilled tradespeople by 2020. In Quebec alone, more than 730,000 professional and technical jobs will open up in the coming year alone. Some of the most sought after workers include industrial mechanics, welders and industrial management supervisors.

The construction industry estimates that it will need an additional 252,000 workers.

These trades require solid math skills, creativity and technological know-how. The pay is good. Skilled professionals earn 3.1% more than the average Canadian.

However, there is a recurring issue and that is workforce mobility. I am not talking about interprovincial mobility, just regional mobility. The placement of work sites in Canada is based on need. In construction, mining and infrastructure, major work sites are often in regions that are far from major cities.

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Workers who want jobs far from home have to pay for their own travel and accommodations while still paying for their permanent residences. Those costs eat up a significant portion of their earnings and are not deductible under the Income Tax Act. That makes working far from home a less attractive proposition, not to mention that these people are also away from their families.

According to the building and construction trades department of the AFL-CIO, mobile workers spend an average of \$3,500 of their personal savings to relocate temporarily.

While some regions of the country are experiencing high unemployment, others are suffering from a labour shortage. The bill introduced by the member for Hamilton Mountain offers a two-fold solution to the problem. Workers working at job sites at least 80 kilometres away from home would not have to take a financial hit. This solution is needed all the more because of the Conservatives' employment insurance reform, which forces workers to accept jobs within 100 kilometres of home.

In addition, Bill C-201 would boost government revenues because the cost of these tax credits will be outweighed by the employment insurance savings this bill will generate.

We also have to consider employers. They will have access to a larger pool of skilled workers, and Canadians will have access to jobs. Employers will no longer have to resort to temporary foreign workers.

Tradespeople have been waiting for a solution to this problem for a long time. The construction trades have actually been asking for this law for the past 30 years. The Conservatives and the Liberals have done absolutely nothing. The NDP has put forward a real solution.

I would like to congratulate my colleague from Hamilton Mountain because she has been fighting for this for years. In 2006, she introduced Bill C-390 and in 2008, Bill C-227. Now she is at it again with Bill C-201.

If the members of this House really want to support tradespeople, they must support this bill. It is time to pass this bill.

This bill will enable mobile workers across Canada to maintain their residences while relocating to get work. The tax credit would cover travel, meals and accommodation reduce amounts paid by employers for those purposes.

The 2008 budget provided this kind of tax relief to truckers as a way to minimize mobility issues in that sector. Everyone in the industry agrees. This bill will really help workers relocate to job sites.

● (1740)

According to the president of the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Local 67, Geoff Roman, we have become too reliant on skilled workers to foot the bill when the country faces a labour shortage.

Robert Blakely, Director of the Canadian Affairs Building and Construction Trades Department agrees. He said:

The baby boomer generation, which no one expected was ever going to retire, is going to retire. We have spaces for nearly 2,500 people to enter the construction

industry in the next five years, and another 163,000 people in the five years after that...If we have trained people all across the country, we need to be able to move them.

In Quebec, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 568, strongly supports the bill. Financial secretary Laurent Talbot stated:

The math is simple. More tradespeople working equals a lower unemployment rate.

It is true. There are roughly 1.6 million construction workers in the country and 10% of them move every year. At an average cost of \$3,500 per worker per year, a 15% tax credit would cost the government \$525 per worker per year, for a total cost of \$84 million a year. For the same number of tradespeople receiving on average \$393 in EI benefits a week for an unemployment period of four weeks, the government would pay \$251 million in EI benefits a year, or nearly two and a half times more than under the bill, if it were passed.

The tax credit proposed in Bill C-201 would translate into a net savings of \$167 million a year. That is not insignificant. This solution has been advocated by a number of experts. The Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities made two similar recommendations in 2008 as part of a study on employability.

Last year, the committee addressed the issue of labour shortages again and made the following recommendation:

Recommendation 30.

The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada study the anticipated cost of introducing new fiscal measures that would help people who find jobs far away from where they live, for example a tax credit for travel and lodging if a person must work more than 80 kilometres from his or her residence, and that it study the potential impact of such measures on labour mobility and labour shortages.

After eight Conservative budgets, there still is no measure to correct this problem, which this government does not seem to take very seriously. Conservative members have said they support labour mobility, which is inconsistent. This is true of the member for Fort McMurray—Athabasca and the member for Prince Albert. Liberal members should also support this bill, given that it affects the entire country and there are construction workers in all ridings.

I hope that the bill introduced by my colleague from Hamilton Mountain, Bill C-201, passes. Tradespersons need to be supported across Canada, and they need to be treated with respect, like all workers in Canada.

● (1745)

[English]

Mr. Dave Van Kesteren (Chatham-Kent—Essex, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate this opportunity to speak on Bill C-201. It is a well-intentioned bill, but there are some serious flaws.

The economy is and still remains fragile. Simply put, now is not the time to engage in an estimated \$60 million per year of reckless and duplicate spending.

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Our government will continue to identify efficient ways of supporting our apprentices and tradespeople while creating jobs and economic growth. To put it bluntly, Bill C-201 does the exact opposite of this. It is a costly and flawed piece of legislation that could expose Canada's tax system to a high likelihood of abuse.

Specifically, it would create new costly tax loopholes that would be vulnerable to unfair tax planning, as the deduction is drafted in an open-ended manner. It would give workers in one field an unfair advantage, potentially distorting the labour market. It would make it difficult to ensure that tax relief is not provided for personal expenses, solely reflecting lifestyle decisions. It would result in certain individuals receiving a windfall gain for those individuals who would have incurred eligible travel and accommodation expenses in any case. Also, it would cost in excess of \$60 million per year. These are clear and plain reasons why our government cannot support such a bill.

Rather than advance the flawed policy of the NDP bill, our Conservative government has introduced a number of measures that actually support tradespersons, encourage businesses to hire apprentices and encourage Canadians to pursue careers in the trades.

In 2006, members will remember that our government introduced the apprenticeship job creation tax credit which provides eligible employers with a tax credit equal to 10% of the wages paid to qualifying apprentices in the first two years of their contract, or up to \$2,000 per apprentice per year.

Also back in 2006, our government introduced in the budget the apprenticeship incentive grant which provides \$1,000 per year to apprentices upon completion of each of the first two years of an apprenticeship program in the red seal trade. Then, in budget 2009, our government introduced the apprenticeship completion grant which provides \$2,000 to apprentices upon the completion of their certification in a red seal trade.

Let us not forget that it was our government that introduced, in 2014, an annual deduction of up to \$500 for tradespersons for the cost of new tools in excess of \$1,127 that they must acquire as a condition of employment. Budget 2006 also increased to \$500 from \$200 the limit on the cost of tools eligible for the 100% capital cost deduction which may be claimed by self-employed tradespersons and businesses.

In addition, there are a number of existing measures under the Income Tax Act for employees, including tradespersons, who travel or relocate for employment.

First, the moving expense deduction recognizes costs incurred by workers who move their ordinary place of residence at least 40 kilometres closer to their place of business or employment in order to pursue employment opportunities. Eligible costs are limited to the amount of income earned at the new location for the year.

Second, the special and remote work sites tax exemption allows employers to provide board and lodging expenses to employees on a tax-free basis. This exemption is limited to benefits paid by the employers on behalf of the employees, which ensures that eligible expenses are incurred for employment purposes.

Third, the travel expenses deduction allows employees who are ordinarily required to carry out the duties of employment away from the employers' place of business or in a different location to deduct travel expenses incurred, including 50% of meal expenses where they are required by the employer to pay their own expenses.

Fourth, similar to the travel expenses deduction for employees, self-employed individuals may deduct reasonable expenses incurred in connection with the generation of income from a business, including travel expenses, for example, lodging, and 50% of meal costs, while they are away from home.

● (1750)

Fifth, the northern residents deduction provides tax relief to individuals in northern and isolated communities to assist in attracting skilled labour to these communities.

Finally, the Canada employment credit, the CEC, introduced by the government in budget 2006 recognizes work-related expenses in a general way. In 2014, the CEC provides a tax credit on employment income up to \$1,127.

As hon. members can see, our government recognizes the importance of the skilled trades to Canada's economy. We continue through our economic action plan to support economic growth and job creation, which includes a number of initiatives that directly support the development of a skilled, mobile and inclusive workforce within an efficient labour market.

Economic action plan 2013 proposes new measures to support the use of apprenticeships in four key ways: supporting the use of apprentices in federal construction and maintenance contracts; ensuring the funds transferred to provinces and territories through the investment in affordable housing support the use of apprentices; encouraging provinces, territories and municipalities to support the use of apprentices in infrastructure projects receiving federal funding as part of the new building Canada plan for infrastructure; and providing \$4 million to work with provinces and territories to harmonize requirements for apprentices.

This kind of support for skills training is crucial to Canada's long-term growth, which is why our Conservative government is committed to maintaining this strong momentum. What the opposition does not understand is that in order to sustain this momentum more needs to be done than just creating training opportunities in high demand areas. It also requires creating the overall conditions for economic success that create high demand in the first place. It is for this reason Canada's economic action plan is a low-tax plan that will eliminate the deficit in 2015, reduce red tape and continue to promote free trade and innovation.

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The results of our efforts speak for themselves. Since the depths of the global economic recession, the worst since the Great Depression, Canada's economy has created over one million net new jobs. These are overwhelmingly full-time, well-paying jobs in the private sector. I am proud to say that this is the strongest growth record among G7 countries, and others are noticing.

We are garnering international attention with Bloomberg recently declaring that Canada was the second best country in which to do business, just behind Hong Kong. Both the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development have recognized the benefits of our plan. They expect Canada to be among the strongest growing economies in the G7 over the next few years.

Our government remains focused on the drivers of growth and job creation: innovation, investment, education, skills and communities. These are underpinned by our ongoing commitment to keeping taxes low and returning a balanced budget in 2015. Unfortunately, bills such as Bill C-201 would do nothing to strengthen Canada's economy. It contains too many flaws, would cost too much, and it fails to take into account the effective policies we currently have in place to help not only tradespersons but all hard-working Canadians.

Given the many shortcomings in the proposal before us today, I encourage my fellow members to vote against this legislation.

• (1755)

Mr. Claude Gravelle (Nickel Belt, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am happy to rise today to speak to this bill amending the Income Tax Act to deal with travel and accommodation deductions for tradespersons.

It is no surprise that this legislation comes from my colleague and friend, the member for Hamilton Mountain. Nickel Belt and Hamilton have much in common besides their good sense in electing New Democrats to the House of Commons.

My colleague has been tireless in her support and advocacy for working men and women. Like her, I understand the extraordinary contributions made by tradespeople for our economy and our communities. People in Hamilton and Nickel Belt get this.

Like her, I know the extraordinary contributions unions make in the fight for justice, fair wages, pension protection of workers, and so much more. Examples are the Edgar Burton food drive in Sudbury, led by local 6500 USW, and the building of the cancer treatment centre in Sudbury, which was driven by all union members in Sudbury and Nickel Belt.

Unlike the government opposite, we on this side respect the union movement and the role unions play in building our communities and our country. The Conservatives proved last night, by supporting Bill C-525, how they feel about unions.

This is a reasonable proposal before the House today. It would allow tradespersons and apprentices to deduct travel and accommodation expenses from their taxable incomes so that they could secure and maintain employment at a construction site that is more than 80 kilometres away from their homes.

I worked for a mining company for 34 years as a tradesman. I know the importance of the trades and the need, from time to time,

for those skilled labourers to travel great distances to projects in other parts of the province or country.

Sitting these past two years on the natural resources committee, I understand the demand for skills in these major oil and mining projects and the likelihood of our workers travelling great distances to secure these jobs. This is an issue that is going to become increasingly important in our country.

This bill will help our working people and their families. The Canadian building and construction trades have been asking for this legislation for over 30 years. They got a lot of words from successive Liberal and Conservative governments, but no action.

Let us think about taking this reasonable small step in helping these tradespeople and our economy.

Construction workers cannot claim their travel or accommodation expenses when they accept jobs in other parts of the province or country. Building and trades officials report that the average expenses to relocate can be about \$3,500. Some cannot afford to pay those expenses knowing that they cannot get a tax credit for them.

The member for Hamilton Mountain has done her homework on making this a win-win situation for everyone. It would solve the challenges in our regions where one area suffers from high unemployment while another suffers from temporary skilled labour shortages. Let us help the skilled workers get to where they need to be.

This legislation is even revenue neutral, given the savings that would happen in employment insurance benefits. The government has trouble figuring this out.

I have a response to a petition I submitted last month that was in favour of Bill C-201. The government calls this bill costly and flawed. The government insults workers, claiming that this tax relief could be open to much abuse, with moves done for lifestyle decisions rather than for work.

Any tax credit is, of course, open to abuse and requires safeguards and monitoring, which the Canada Revenue Agency is supposed to provide. It is not that difficult to confirm that a move has been made to take a skilled job that has not been filled.

The government response also alleges that certain individuals might receive a windfall gain and would have incurred ineligible travel and accommodation expenses in any case. I do not know who they were thinking about when they made these comments. It was probably Duffy, Wallin, Brazeau, Harb, and Lavigne. These people I named are not tradesmen. They are professional fraudsters. They are senators.

• (1800)

It is not difficult to make clear what an eligible expense is and who qualifies.

The CRA is also there to investigate any double-dipping.

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This is also a win-win for the employers, giving them access to much larger pools of qualified workers. We need to act when we look at this country's demographics, including the baby boom generation, the numbers to retire in the next 10 years, and the statistics on shortage of skilled workers.

[Translation]

This bill has been introduced in every parliamentary session since 2006. It was part of the NDP's election platforms in 2008 and 2011. What we want is simple. The bill would allow tradespersons and apprentices to deduct travel and accommodation expenses from their taxable income so that they can secure and maintain employment at a construction site that is more than 80 kilometres away from their home.

These mobile workers across Canada continue to have to worry about maintaining a residence and their family, while spending their own money to travel in order to find work. The tax credit would cover the cost of travel, meals and accommodation and reduce the amounts paid by employers for the same things. The 2008 budget offered a similar break to truck drivers in order to reduce problems associated with mobility in that industry.

[English]

I remember what the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department director, Robert Blakely, said at the 2012 pre-budget consultations:

We have spaces for nearly 2,500 people to enter the construction industry in the next five years, and another 163,000 people in the five years after that. It's an industry that is going to change. If we have trained people all across the country, we need to be able to move them.

There are an estimated 1.6 million construction workers in Canada. An estimated 10% of them travel each year. This legislation is even revenue neutral, given the savings that would happen in employment insurance payments.

The government has trouble figuring this out. The government needs to do the real math, not the nonsense of estimating the cost of the bill at \$60 million per year.

Mr. Colin Mayes (Okanagan—Shuswap, CPC): Mr. Speaker, Bill C-201, an act to amend the Income Tax Act, would in essence allow tradespersons and indentured apprentices to deduct from their taxable income any travel and accommodation expenses that they have incurred in order to secure and maintain employment in a construction activity at a job site that is located at least 80 kilometres away from their ordinary residence.

Let me first say that our government encourages new ways and ideas to improve Canada's tax system. Our government has a strong record of tax fairness and tax relief. We work diligently to treat each tax dollar we receive responsibly. Therefore, we are always open to ways that can keep money where it belongs, in the pockets of hard-working Canadians.

We realize that Bill C-201 has good intentions, such as providing tax relief for tradespersons and indentured apprentices who have to travel a long distance to work. We thank the member for her concern for these hard-working Canadians, but unfortunately the bill itself has too many problems for the government to support it.

Like speakers before me have mentioned when the bill was first debated, the bill contains flaws that could create opportunities for tax planning. It is a piece of legislation that could pose a very significant cost to taxpayers. Further, the bill is redundant, considering that our government already has thoughtful and practical measures to support apprenticeships and tradespersons.

Allow me to elaborate on that point. In response to growing shortages of skilled labour in some parts of our country, our government already provides a number of measures to support apprentices and tradespersons who are an integral part of our economy. Specifically, the government has introduced a number of measures to encourage businesses to hire apprentices and Canadians to pursue careers in the trades.

Let me share what we have done. Budget 2006 introduced the apprenticeship job creation tax credit which provides eligible employers a tax credit equal to 10% of the wages paid to qualifying apprentices in the first two years of their contract, up to \$2,000 per apprentice per year. Budget 2006 also introduced the apprenticeship incentive grant, which provides \$1,000 per year to apprentices upon completion of each of the first two years of an apprenticeship program in the red seal trades. Also, budget 2009 introduced the apprenticeship completion grant, which provides \$2,000 to apprentices upon completion of their certification in red seal trades.

We have consistently supported tradespersons in Canada. Budget 2006 also introduced an annual deduction of up to \$500, in 2013, for tradespersons for the cost of new tools in excess of \$1,117 that they must acquire as a condition of employment. Budget 2006 also increased to \$500 from \$200 the limit on the cost of tools eligible for the 100% capital cost deduction which may be claimed by self-employed tradespersons and businesses. Our government has also extended the fees eligible for the tuition tax credit to include those from examinations required to be certified as a tradesperson in Canada.

It does not stop there. In addition to these tax measures and grants, our government, through economic action plan 2013, proposed new measures to support the use of apprentices in three key areas. The first is changing the government's approach to procurement by introducing measures to support the use of apprentices in federal construction and maintenance contracts. Second is ensuring that funds transferred to provinces and territories through the investment in affordable housing support the use of apprentices. Third, we are encouraging provinces, territories and municipalities to support the use of apprentices in infrastructure projects receiving federal funding as part of the new building Canada plan for infrastructure.

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To further reduce barriers to accreditation in the skilled trades, economic action plan 2013 announced the government's intention to reallocate \$4 million over three years to work with provinces and territories to harmonize requirements for apprentices, as well as examining the use of practical tests as a means of assessment in targeted skilled trades.

• (1805)

Economic action plan 2013 was a large commitment by our government to support the skilled trades and encourage growth in these very important industries. Unfortunately, the member opposite who put forward Bill C-201 voted against every one of these measures. Therefore, it is surprising to see her claim full support for tradespeople across the country.

Having established how our government has been, and continues to be, proactive when it comes to providing practical support for apprentices and tradespeople, I would like to discuss the important policy concerns that the bill raises. To put it bluntly, as drafted, Bill C-201 would make it difficult to ensure that tax relief is not provided in respect of personal expenses reflecting lifestyle decisions. For example, expenses incurred by eligible individuals who choose to live more than 80 kilometres away from the workplace for personal reasons would qualify for the tax relief. Furthermore, the open-ended nature of the proposed deduction would make it vulnerable to unfair tax planning. For example, individuals could arrange their affairs to claim a recreational property, such as a cottage more than 80 kilometres away from work, as their principal residence and deduct the cost of maintaining their urban residence as an expense required to secure and maintain employment. Legislating tax credits that are open to abuse is not how we create a fair tax system for all Canadians.

Finally, implementing Bill C-201 would cost taxpayers up to \$60 million. Since our government already has significant measures in place to provide tax relief to tradespeople, we do not see any added benefit to forgoing more tax revenue for a measure that may not prove to be effective, and a measure that could subsidize personal choices, for that matter.

We take pride in the fact that under our government the overall federal tax burden is the lowest it has been in 50 years. In total, our government has introduced more than 160 tax-relief measures since 2006, reducing taxes in every way that the Government of Canada collects them. These are real measures that are helping all Canadians across the country: tradespeople, apprentices, families, seniors, and the list goes on. Canadians at all income levels are benefiting from the personal income tax relief introduced by the government, with low- and middle-income Canadians receiving proportionately greater relief. The average family of four is saving over \$3,200 per year in taxes, and more than one million low-income Canadians have been removed from the tax rolls.

This is great news, and more work must be done. However, we must be cautious of proposals that would unnecessarily burden the work our government is doing to balance the budget. Our government is focused on the drivers of growth and job creation: innovation, investment, education, skills, and communities, underpinned by our ongoing commitment to keep taxes low, and returning to a balanced budget.

Therefore, it is our position that Canadians do not need Bill C-201. It contains too many flaws. It costs too much, and it is redundant, considering the policies we currently have in place to help not only tradespeople, but all working Canadians as well. With that, I encourage my fellow members to vote against the bill.

• (1810)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Moore (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to speak to the bill introduced by my colleague, the member for Hamilton Mountain, because it will help the people in my riding in particular. I will explain in real terms what they experience, and this will help everyone understand how beneficial the bill is.

This bill allows tradespeople—mainly construction workers—and apprentices to deduct from their taxable income any travel and accommodation expenses that they incur in order to secure and maintain employment at a job site that is located more than 80 kilometres away from their residence.

In order to help members understand how the bill works, I will briefly explain the geography of my riding.

My riding includes four RCMs: Abitibi to the east, Abitibi-Ouest to the northwest, the city of Rouyn-Noranda a little further south, and Témiscamingue. Each RCM has a main city located more than 80 km from the next city.

With this bill, a worker can work for a while in another RCM in order to honour a contract and can deduct travel and accommodation expenses from his taxable income.

Why is this particularly attractive? In some RCMs, there is often too much work for one person in specific construction trades, but not enough for two people, or there is work, but not enough to hire a worker on a full-time basis.

For example, if a plumber in the Témiscamingue RCM does not have enough work, he can accept one- or two-month contracts in a neighbouring RCM in order to earn a full-time income. Thus, he will be able to complete a job in a neighbouring RCM. In a situation where there is too much work for one person, but not enough for two, this plumber can accept a portion of the work.

At present, there is a problem in the Témiscamingue RCM, to the south, which has a smaller population. It probably has the smallest number of available hours of work. Often, it is not worth their while for people from other RCMs to accept contracts there.

There are municipalities that put out a call for tenders to install air conditioners, for example. This has to be done by someone with a competency card. However, no one wants the job because the pay is not high enough to offset their costs. No one bids or the bids are ridiculously high. If the individual who accepts the contract were able to deduct his costs from his taxable income, it would be worth his while to go.

This bill definitely recognizes the reality of rural areas where the major centres are more than 80 kilometres apart. Of course, major centres are relative. In my riding, a town of 10,000 people is a major centre. I know that it is not the same everywhere. Given that the major centres are more than 80 kilometres apart, this bill really reflects the local reality.

I think it would be interesting to have some statistics on the construction industry in Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

In 2009 and 2011, there were 3,000 construction jobs on average. That represents 4.4% of regional employment. Many people in my region would tangibly benefit from the bill.

● (1815)

I would also like to say that the number of housing starts keeps increasing because the vacancy rate has been under 1% for the past few years in cities such as Amos, Rouyn-Noranda and Val-d'Or.

Another factor, in addition to the vacancy rate, is that sometimes builders cannot find the people to do the job. These construction sites slow down. This bill could help get projects up and running because the financial incentive for workers who want to go elsewhere will make it possible to move labour around. Vacancy rates are one factor, but so are the projects themselves. Although the industrial mining sector has slowed down somewhat, there was a significant boom in 2013.

In real terms, investments are not growing. In 2011, they apparently totalled more than \$2 billion, including mining and hydroelectric projects in northern Quebec and Abitibi-Témiscamingue, and not counting the activities that could develop from the Plan Nord of the Quebec government of the time.

From 2000 to 2011, according to the Institut de la statistique du Québec, the value of construction permits grew at an annual average of more than 10% in most RCMs in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region, particularly in the Vallée-de-l'Or RCM and the city of Rouyn-Noranda, for a total of \$154 million and \$80 million respectively.

There has been clear growth in construction in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, primarily in the residential construction sector, followed by institutional and commercial construction, industrial construction, and civil engineering and road construction. It is hard to find workers for this growing sector because the financial compensation is inadequate.

Nonetheless, we have a tangible way of helping a rural region like mine. That is why I hope that the members of all parties will support this bill, which was introduced at the very start of the session. We were quite anxious to talk about it. My colleague from Hamilton Mountain introduced it just after the election. I am extremely pleased to finally speak to it and to say how beneficial it will be to my riding, Abitibi-Témiscamingue. I sincerely thank my colleague for introducing this bill that will help my riding.

● (1820)

[*English*]

Ms. Chris Charlton (Hamilton Mountain, NDP): Mr. Speaker, I had hoped to be able to rise in the chamber tonight to thank my colleagues from all sides of the House for putting partisanship aside and doing the right thing; the right thing for Canada's building and

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construction trades, for employers who cannot find enough skilled workers to meet their job requirements, for regional economies and for the taxpayers of this country. We could have achieved all of that simply by supporting Bill C-201, an act that would allow tradespersons and indentured apprentices to deduct from their taxable income any travel and accommodation expenses they incur to secure and maintain employment in a construction activity at a job site located at least 80 kilometres away from their ordinary place of residence.

However, it is clear from the Conservative members' comments in this debate that they are once again going to allow partisanship to stand in the way of good public policy. In fact, the member for Yukon basically said as much when he stated essentially that I should not have had the audacity to introduce this bill because, in his view, it should have been introduced by the Conservatives as part of their budget process. I would have been happy for that to happen. In fact, ever since I first introduced this bill in 2006, I have repeatedly been in touch with the government, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, to indicate that I would happily withdraw my bill if the government wanted to introduce it as a Conservative budget measure. However, eight years later, the building trades have still only received lip service instead of action and, frankly, they deserve better. What they are getting from the current government is the same run-around that they got from previous Liberal and Conservative governments for the last 35 years. It is a disgrace. The reasons being articulated by members on the government side just do not hold water. I only have five minutes to participate in tonight's debate, but thankfully all of the arguments are easy to rebut.

The first argument put forward by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Revenue was that the bill would be very costly and that the cost would be significant to our economy at this time. However, just a few minutes later he went on to take credit for "Canada's strong economic performance". Well, which is it? Did the Conservatives fail and the economy is still fragile? Or is the economy robust and the Conservatives are simply refusing to act? Either way, the government is failing Canada's building and construction trades.

The next argument put forth by government MPs is that the Canada jobs grant is a better solution than my bill for the skilled labour shortage, which has been identified by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce as the number one issue facing its membership. However, oops, the Canada jobs grant does not actually exist yet and, given the provinces' rejection of the federal approach on this file, it may in fact never get off the ground. However, that of course has not stopped the government from already spending taxpayer dollars on advertising this non-existent program.

Adjournment Proceedings

To add insult to injury, the Conservative talking points then suggest that my bill would provide tax relief for “personal expenses that reflect lifestyle decisions”. That argument is buttressed by examples of imaginary workers who would use my bill to scam the government by going to the cottage so they could claim to be more than 80 kilometres away from a job site that in reality is close to their primary residence. That argument is so absurd that I do not even know where to begin, but suffice it to say that tax credits only return a percentage of the actual money spent on travel, so no one is going to come out ahead financially under this bizarrely concocted Conservative scenario. It would be cheaper for them to live at home. I do not think I will be taking any lessons on tax evasion from a government that has done nothing to recover the \$5 billion to \$7.8 billion in Canadian tax revenue that is lost annually to tax havens around the world.

The last argument put forth by the government is that the bill would “raise equity concerns”, meaning that by singling out tradespersons my bill would not go far enough in offering the same benefits to other workers. On that point, we can agree, and I would be more than happy to entertain amendments in committee to broaden the coverage of my bill. I had specifically kept the focus narrow to keep the bill revenue-neutral and to alleviate the cost concerns that I knew would be at the root of the government's objections. However, by all means let us include others; the members of ACTRA, for one, would be delighted. However, the only way to do that is to actually vote in favour of my bill at second reading, so it will end up in committee where amendments could be made. That is where the rubber would hit the road.

I know the Conservatives are not sincere in wanting to improve the bill. They have their marching orders. Even those members like the MPs for Brant and Mississauga—Streetsville and the Minister of Labour, who spoke out in favour of my bill at the HUMA committee, now appear to be backtracking. I cannot believe they would just allow themselves to be muzzled by the PMO. Nor do I want to believe they are the kind of politicians who say one thing to one audience and something else to a different crowd. I want to believe they are more principled than that.

So today in these final few seconds of second-reading debate, I want to speak directly to them and say to stand up for what they believe in, that they know this bill is the right thing to do; to talk to their colleagues and tell them that it is never wrong to fight for what is right.

On February 5 when this bill comes to a vote, let us make history. Let us pass this initiative that helps the very men and women who have literally built our country. Canada's building and construction trades deserve nothing less.

•(1825)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): Actually, the vote may come sooner than February 5.

Is the House ready for the question?

Some hon. members: Question.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The question is on the motion. Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Some hon. members: No.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those in favour of the motion will please say yea.

Some hon. members: Yea.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): All those opposed will please say nay.

Some hon. members: Nay.

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): In my opinion, the nays have it.

And five or more members having risen:

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The recorded division stands deferred until Wednesday, February 5, 2014, immediately before the time provided for private members' business.

ADJOURNMENT PROCEEDINGS

A motion to adjourn the House under Standing Order 38 deemed to have been moved.

[English]

ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS

Ms. Niki Ashton (Churchill, NDP): Mr. Speaker, to clarify, my late show is actually based on a question that was directed to the Minister of Employment on the lack of follow-up in terms of funding that was committed to aboriginal youth programming in northern Manitoba. To be specific, it is the fact that the government has dropped the ball when it comes to funding the skills link programming.

I do not know who can say no to the skills link program. It is a program that is absolutely integral to ensuring that aboriginal youth, particularly at-risk aboriginal youth, do not fall through the cracks, and that they continue furthering their education, often with a special focus on the trades.

I am speaking in particular about two programs in northern Manitoba that have been set back by the Conservative government's failure to live up to its commitment of funding. I am talking about the youth build program that is based out of the Boys & Girls Club in Thompson, Manitoba, and the programming based out of the friendship centre in Flin Flon, Manitoba.

Both of these programs were told that their applications for skills link funding were in good standing. Both programs were told that funding would be in the works. The staff in Thompson were told that the funding would be rolling out in September and then it was October. They were then given the date of January 20. All of those three dates have come and gone. These executive directors and these teams, who are simply trying to make a better future for these young people, have faced calls that lead nowhere and commitment after commitment that is not fulfilled.

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What it really comes down to is a fundamental fracturing of the kind of trust that people ought to have in their government, not just on any issue but on an issue that the Conservative government has time and time again paid lip service to. It says that it wants to support training for aboriginal youth, but where is the money? The commitment has been there. We have heard the lip service in throne speech after throne speech. We even heard it in the last one, but when it comes time to put its money where its mouth is, the Conservative government is not there.

If that is not bad enough, let us look at the reality. The program in Thompson attracts around 20 youth. Often, these youth have dropped out of school. Some of them are teenage parents. Some have had a tough life, where they have been involved in gangs and dangerous activities. However, every single one of these youth are in this program, they applied and they were accepted, because they show not only the promise of change but the commitment to get their lives going on the right track, to get an education, to get a trade, to get a job, to sustain their families, to contribute to their communities.

These youth in both Thompson and Flin Flon, and perhaps in other communities, are the people who are being let down by the federal government. My question is this. When will that funding flow and when will these aboriginal youth be supported?

• (1830)

Mr. Scott Armstrong (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Employment and Social Development, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to rise to speak to the question from the hon. member for Churchill.

We are committed to ensuring that first nation youth have the skills they need to enter the workforce and benefit from participating in the economy.

To help achieve this goal, the first nation and Inuit skills link program is one of two programs that our government administers under the first nations and Inuit youth employment strategy. The skills link program provides many different aspects, including wage subsidies for work placements and mentorship for youth who are not in school, to enable them to develop the valuable skills necessary to ensure full participation in the workforce. It includes work experience specifically in the field of information and communications technology. It includes activities designed to support aboriginal entrepreneurship. It also includes training experiences that support youth in acquiring skills needed for work placements. It includes career development information, including awareness and support activities like career fairs and leadership projects, career planning, and counselling activities. It also includes activities that promote interest in science and technology among aboriginal youth, including science camps, computer clubs, and activities that connect science and technology to traditional aboriginal knowledge. As members can see, there is a diverse amount of opportunities contained within the skills link program for aboriginal and Inuit youth.

In Manitoba, we have arrangements in place to deliver approximately \$4.5 million to support skills link and summer work experience projects for 64 first nations and organizations this fiscal year. The skills link program aims to promote the benefits of education as key to labour market participation and to help first nation and Inuit youth overcome barriers to employment.

Another objective of the program is to introduce youth to a variety of career options and help youth acquire skills by providing stipends for mentored work experience, as well as support the provision of mentored school-based work experience and study opportunities such as co-operative education and internships.

Ultimately, we expect participating first nation and Inuit youth to have enhanced employability skills, increased awareness of the benefits of education, enhanced ability to make employment-related decisions, increased appreciation for science and technology as a viable career or education choice, improved attitudes toward the transition from school to work, and an increased ability to participate in the labour market.

These objectives and expected outcomes are consistent with, and support, our government's youth employment strategy skills link program. We will continue to invest in aboriginal youth through these innovative programs.

Our government is focusing on funding projects that generate tangible results. We will continue to support the delivery of essential programs and services through organizations that get results, contributing to the improved living conditions and economic development of aboriginal peoples, while respecting Canadian taxpayers.

Ms. Niki Ashton: Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the time my colleague has taken to share that message.

I know very well what the skills link program is about. The reality is that the government has committed funds that have not flowed at this point, we are talking about six months down the line, from that initial application.

I noticed the significant figure he mentioned in terms of Manitoba. My question, and what a lot of people are asking, is this. If the money has not flowed to two programs in the constituency that has the highest per capita indigenous population, where did that money go? Is there perhaps a political agenda here; that ridings represented by government members are having their programming approved rather than programs in ridings held by opposition members? I hope that is not the case. I would ask my colleague to look into these two cases to make sure that it is the youth who are being prioritized rather than political agendas.

• (1835)

Mr. Scott Armstrong: Mr. Speaker, I will commit to look into those two particular programs.

Adjournment Proceedings

The only political agenda going on here is the fact that our government puts millions of dollars into the youth employment strategy for all Canadian youth across the country, including significant dollars for Inuit and aboriginal youth, and that member and her party consistently vote against that money. Therefore, they are asking where the money is to support these programs after they have voted against the money when it was placed in the budget in the first place. That is the political agenda we are seeing here.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Mr. Bruce Hyer (Thunder Bay—Superior North, GP): Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak on an issue that now more than ever needs immediate action if we wish our children and our grandchildren to have a healthy planet and healthy lives.

Plus, rising carbon pollution is threatening our prosperity. I say pollution, because that is what it is. If a pollutant is anything that has harmful effects when introduced into air or water, then greenhouse gases, like carbon dioxide, are pollutants, if there ever were any.

Instead of reducing this pollution, Environment Canada's own numbers show that we are on track to blow way past our 2020 emissions target of a 20% reduction and will release 734 megatonnes of greenhouse gas pollution in that year. That is a far cry from the government's own watered down target of 612 megatonnes. Much of that increase will be from the oil and gas sector, which the government first promised to regulate in, wait for it, 2009. Four environment ministers and five years later, industry is still waiting for rules that would give us carbon reduction and the energy companies certainty.

Today science is telling us that we have only a couple of years left to turn things around. The answer is not complicated. Most agree that a polluter pay approach is the fairest and most effective way to lower emissions. We pollute, we pay. It is simple. Implementing it is simple too. We just put a price on carbon emissions, as many other countries are already doing.

Putting an upstream fee on emissions as they come out of the ground will mean that only a handful of sources need to be regulated, and we will avoid the need for a huge bureaucracy measuring emissions from every smokestack and tailpipe in Canada.

Yes, this rising fee will mean carbon-intensive energy will cost more, and that is the entire point. Because of this price signal, the market would use less and would turn to less carbon-intensive alternatives. Conservatives claim to believe in market forces. This is the most efficient, market friendly way to reduce emissions.

We can eliminate the impact on most families by making it completely revenue neutral so that every dime collected from the fee is returned directly to Canadians to do with whatever they choose. If they use less energy, they will actually make money. If they do not, they will not. It is up to them.

The system is called fee and dividend, and I hope members will recognize that it is a much better option than cap and trade or a carbon tax. I know what some will say: putting a price on carbon by any method is a carbon tax, and that will kill jobs. No, fee and dividend would create new jobs. Let us not forget that under this definition, the government's own regulatory approach is a carbon tax.

Let us admit up front that no party wants a policy that kills jobs. However, do revenue neutral policies to internalize the price of emissions cause economic harm? We have one of the world's best answers to that question right here in Canada. B.C. implemented a carbon tax, and the sky did not fall.

In contrast to taxes, under revenue neutral fee and dividend, the government keeps none of the fee. Fee and dividend has the greatest potential to reduce emissions, being simpler and business friendly, and it would provide the best incentive of all for renewable energy alternatives: price. That is why the Citizens Climate Lobby is pushing hard for it.

• (1840)

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, our government takes the challenges of climate change seriously.

For this reason, our government is implementing a sector-by-sector regulatory approach to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Our approach is achieving real reductions while providing regulatory certainty, driving innovation, and leveraging capital stock turnover to avoid locking in long-lived, high-emitting infrastructure.

We are aligning certain sectoral policies with the United States, given the degree of economic integration between our two countries. This approach allows Canada to maximize progress on reducing emissions while maintaining economic competitiveness.

We began implementing our approach by addressing two of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions in this country: the transportation and electricity sectors.

In the transportation sector, we worked with the United States to put in place harmonized emission standards for new passenger automobiles and light trucks up to the 2016 model year vehicles, and issued proposed regulations for later model years. With these regulations, it is projected that the 2025 model year vehicles will produce 50% less greenhouse gas emissions than 2008 vehicles. We have taken the same approach to improving fuel efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions from heavy-duty vehicles, such as full-sized pick-ups, semi-trucks, garbage trucks, and buses.

As a result of these regulations, greenhouse gas emissions from the 2018 model year heavy-duty vehicles will be reduced by up to 23%.

Adjournment Proceedings

In the electricity sector, our government's coal-fired electricity regulations further strengthen Canada's position as a world leader in clean electricity production. We have introduced a tough new regulatory performance standard for coal-fired electricity generation. With these regulations, Canada became the first major coal user to ban the construction of traditional coal-fired electricity generation units.

The fact is that no other government has done as much to reduce greenhouse gases as ours. As I mentioned, our approach is generating results, and Canadians can be proud of it.

As a result of our actions, Canada's 2020 emissions are projected to be about 128 megatonnes lower than what they would have been under the Liberals. It is important to note that this is equivalent to shutting down 37 coal-fired electricity generation plants.

Our government will continue to focus on a pragmatic approach to climate change that will reduce emissions while continuing to create jobs and encourage the growth of Canada's economy. We will achieve all of this without imposing a \$20-billion carbon tax on Canadians as proposed by the opposition and the NDP.

Mr. Bruce Hyer: Mr. Speaker, most MPs in this House, on both sides of the aisle, want to do what is best for Canada. We know that our job as MPs sometimes means making tough decisions, decisions we cannot avoid any longer. Looking at the government's own numbers, every MP knows we are not doing enough, whether or not their party will allow them to admit that publicly. Each of us knows that inaction on climate change will be far more expensive than taking action. We must pick our poison.

In Canada, so far the debate has been sadly polarized, like tonight, between cap and trade, which the U.S. is never likely to adopt, or a carbon tax, which political parties do not want to touch. Let us take the good advice of the Citizens Climate Lobby and support fee and dividend as the simplest, fairest, and most efficient way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in a business-friendly way.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Speaker, the reality is that since 2006 our government has taken action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and build a more sustainable environment through more than \$10 billion in investments to support green infrastructure, energy efficiency, clean energy technologies, and the production of cleaner energy.

We are seeing successes. Greenhouse emissions have decreased while the economy has continued to grow. I think that is the first time that has ever happened. Canadians can also be proud of the fact that per capita emissions are at a historic low of 20.4 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per person, the lowest level since tracking began in 1990.

We are committed to our approach, and it is working. Canadians can be sure that we will continue to oppose the NDP's \$20-billion carbon tax.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): Mr. Speaker, I was somewhat surprised that my question to the Prime Minister on December 5 just before our Christmas break was viewed by whomever categorizes my late show questions as one relating to natural resources, as I really feel it deals with first nations rights and the responsibilities of the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and

Northern Development. The reality is that the question I raised deals with a critical issue in general and a very disturbing issue in particular.

On December 5, I asked my question of the Prime Minister. This was coincidentally the same day the Prime Minister created his own special task force and asked Mr. Doug Eyford to prepare a report on forging partnerships and building relationships with first nations in relation to proposed west coast energy projects.

When that report came out, it made it very clear what everybody already knew. The Supreme Court of Canada had made it abundantly clear that the federal government, provincial governments and corporations dealing with first nations rights and territories have a strong constitutionally protected requirement to fully consult in a meaningful way with first nations before participating in resource development on their land.

Mr. Eyford's report contained four points. He urged the Prime Minister to build trust, foster inclusion, advance reconciliation and then take action.

What I raised with the Prime Minister was the distressing case of what took place on Elsipogtog First Nation, a Mi'kmaq community near Rexton, New Brunswick. The first nation community was dealing with an energy proposal, the non-conventional issue of hydraulic fracking. The community of Elsipogtog was widely supported by people in New Brunswick and adjacent communities, who were also concerned and did not want fracking. They were concerned about their groundwater.

The protests that led to arrests were against SWN, a Houston-based company, that wanted to do hydraulic fracking and seismic testing. This testing was supported by the New Brunswick premier but not by the people of New Brunswick and not by the Mi'kmaq people. Exploration testing was to be done without consultation with Elsipogtog and Mi'kmaq first nations in contravention of numerous court decisions, most notably the Marshall decision, which dealt specifically with Mi'kmaq first nations' rights. This first nation has unceded territory. No treaty could possibly be produced that would allow what has been going on in New Brunswick with the pressure for hydraulic fracking on first nations territory.

I will quote my question to the Prime Minister:

In the context of the increasing tensions in New Brunswick in the fracking protests there, does the Prime Minister recognize that he is legally bound by our Constitution to ensure that the Mi'kmaq of Elsipogtog are fully consulted in advance of any fracking on their unceded territory?

The Prime Minister responded by saying he understood his obligations and in fact had just received the report to which I referred moments ago from Mr. Eyford.

Adjournment Proceedings

I remain deeply concerned about this incident as a representative of British Columbia and the member of Parliament for Saanich—Gulf Islands. There is a tremendous amount of anxiety about what could be coming if there should be, God forbid, a pipeline approved over first nations' territories where British Columbians and first nations do not want it.

If the example of what has taken place at Elsipogtog were to be played out in British Columbia, I would be deeply concerned. There was neither consultation nor was there an attempt to build trust, good relationships or reconciliation. Instead there were the violent RCMP arrests on what had been up to that moment a non-violent protest. We need an explanation.

● (1845)

Mr. Colin Carrie (Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of the Environment, CPC): Mr. Speaker, I think my colleague is aware that fracking is mostly under provincial jurisdiction. However, I am happy to say that our government always strives to meet its constitutional obligations.

Aboriginal consultations are a key part of our responsible resource development initiatives. I am pleased to have this opportunity to explain how our government is working to strengthen aboriginal involvement in Canada's resource sectors.

Canada's resource industries already employ some 32,000 aboriginal people, more than any other sector of our economy. This level of employment will only increase as we see more and more projects come forward. Indeed, over \$650 billion worth of projects have been proposed, the majority of which are near or on aboriginal lands. These projects could have an enormously positive impact on the prosperity of aboriginal communities.

The member opposite has been clear in her opposition to resource development. I hope the member opposite will excuse me if we follow a different path.

Our government wants to ensure that we develop our resources responsibly to create jobs while ensuring that the environment is protected. Our government's plan for responsible resource development is improving Canada's regulatory system by reducing red tape and modernizing processes, while strengthening environmental protection and enhancing consultations with aboriginal peoples.

As my colleague mentioned, we are taking action. Douglas Eyford, Canada's special federal representative on west coast energy infrastructure, recently provided the government with recommendations that will support greater aboriginal participation in resource development. The themes of the Eyford report—trust, inclusion, and reconciliation—can guide all parties in building further the relationships that will underpin responsible resource development and the participation of aboriginal peoples. The report by the special federal representative is a solid basis for sustained engagement with west coast aboriginal people. It recognizes an opportunity for aboriginal communities to realize long-term benefits and to be partners in west coast energy development.

Our government has been, and currently is, engaging and will continue to engage with aboriginal communities on concrete ways to move forward on the recommendations in the report.

The Eyford report builds upon previous initiatives taken by our government to support aboriginal participation in the resource sectors. For example, in 2012 the federal budget provided more than \$690 million for skills development, education, and infrastructure. In addition, our plan for responsible resource development includes a commitment to ensure that consultations with aboriginal peoples on natural resources projects are more consistent, accountable, meaningful, and timely.

The plan includes, first, the integration of consultations with aboriginal peoples into the new environmental assessment and regulatory processes; second, the provision of \$13.6 million over two years to support aboriginal consultations on projects; third, the designation of a lead department or agency as a single crown consultation coordinator for each major project review; fourth, negotiation with provincial and territorial governments to better align government processes and improve the involvement of aboriginal peoples; and fifth, the promotion of positive and long-term relationships with aboriginal communities to facilitate greater participation of aboriginal peoples in the direct and indirect benefits of new resource projects.

● (1850)

Ms. Elizabeth May: Mr. Speaker, I did reference Mr. Eyford's report. However, it is clear from the events in Elsipogtog that it has certainly come too late for that relationship. There has been no consultation advanced.

While it is true that fracking is a provincial responsibility, the federal environment commissioner, in his fall 2012 report, found that for the parts that are federal, such as tracking toxic chemicals used in fracking, Environment Canada did not even have a full list of those chemicals used, and it always remains a federal fiduciary responsibility to ensure that first nations' rights are not being infringed upon through resource development.

As for the question of going forward in British Columbia and my opposition to resource development, I do not oppose resource development. I oppose the reckless, untrammelled rapid development of oil sands for the sole purpose of shipping out raw product. If the bitumen were being processed in Alberta, I think our discussions would be very different. However, all pipeline proposals are for raw bitumen mixed with a diluent that has to be purchased from Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Colin Carrie: Mr. Speaker, as our government has stated repeatedly, we will ensure that aboriginal consultations fully meet our duty to consult and are open and meaningful. We will continue meeting with first nations groups to strengthen the ongoing dialogue between the federal government and first nations.

Adjournment Proceedings

Resource projects give aboriginal communities the potential to turn the high cost of isolation into a huge advantage of proximity. In fact, most mines and exploration properties in Canada are located within 200 kilometres of an aboriginal community. There are 400,000 aboriginal youth under the age of 15, representing a major wave of potential new entrants into the labour market, and over the next 10 years it is expected that Canada's resource sectors will need to hire thousands of workers.

The scale of economic activity is enormous and it is estimated that there is a potential of \$650 billion worth of major resource projects in Canada in the next decade. Such development would create thousands of new jobs. Right now, the resource industries make up about one-fifth of our national economy, creating and supporting

more than 1.8 million jobs across our great country. In addition to the good jobs they provide, the resource industries generate over \$30 billion in royalties and tax revenues, funds that support schools, hospitals, and other vital services for all Canadians, including aboriginal communities.

• (1855)

The Acting Speaker (Mr. Barry Devolin): The motion to adjourn the House is now deemed to have been adopted. Accordingly, this House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 10 a.m. pursuant to Standing Order 24(1).

(The House adjourned at 6:55 p.m.)

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